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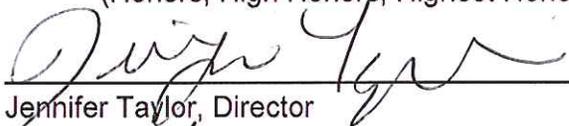
The Lives of Others: The Colonial Gaze in Albanian Film Coproductions

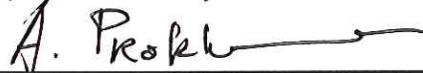
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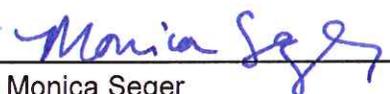
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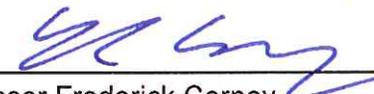
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## Introduction and Thesis Statement

Due to Albania's almost complete isolation from the rest of the world during the development of its film industry in the Cold War, Albanian cinema is one of the least studied European national cinemas, but the country's geopolitical importance has meant that nations hoping to secure their interests in Albania heavily invest in film coproductions.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this foreign influence, these Albanian films may reflect the gaze of the foreign coproducers more than the self-perception of Albanians. Filmmakers from these nations use the Albanian setting and identity to discuss issues of identity in their own countries because of the country's importance to their nations' colonial interests. This colonizing influence can be seen in two films produced with Albanian cooperation, both produced at turning points in Albania's relationship with the producing countries. *The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg* (USSR/Albania, 1953) is a blatantly colonizing film that reinterprets medieval Albanian history as an idealized model for Soviet history and society, demonstrating the stability and continuity of national identity under Stalinist social structures. 41 years later, *Lamerica* (Italy, 1994) uses the recent collapse of communism to complicate Italian assumptions about their own identity's stability. The film attempts to be a humanizing response to the racist and colonizing rhetoric aimed at Albanian migrants in Italian politics at the time. However, it does so by using Albania to make a story about Italians, drawing sympathy for Albanians from their

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<sup>1</sup> The term "coproduction" is rather problematic, as will become clear later in the thesis. *Skanderbeg* is technically a coproduction because it was partially financed by Albania, while *Lamerica* is filmed on site with cooperation with Albanian actors and government authorities, but was not directly financed by the Albanian government. Both films claim to be giving Albanians agency, but actually engage in a colonial gaze.

similarity to an Italian character who suffers with them, rather than from Albanians' own stories. In both films, whether the officially coproduced *Skanderbeg* or the Italian production *Lamerica*, Albania is being used as a setting to say what the producers want to say about both it and their own country, without any input from the Albanians themselves.

### **Methodology**

This thesis draws upon multiple disparate theoretical influences in order to create a framework to diagnose the colonial gaze of these films. The concept of the colonial gaze, as used in this thesis, is a combination of the “colonial project” and other concepts discussed in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. We can define a colonial project as a national attempt (through narratives, monuments, histories, etc.) to shore up a nation’s own identity by casting itself as the norm and another nation or group as an Other. According to Said, that Other is often understood in the West as Eastern or “Oriental.” He writes, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ ...The basic distinction between East and West [is] the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Said is arguing that this project is typically predicated upon a group of “experts” on the Other whose writings on the Other seek to define it as different from and inferior to their own (Western) society. We may thus define the colonial gaze as the perspective of these “experts” looking upon the Other space in order to justify subjugating that perceived

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<sup>2</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1977. Print. Page 3.

Other. This thesis conceives of these films as responding to the mainstream discourses of their countries of origin, which served Orientalist colonial projects by placing Albania as an Other space between the Orient and the West. In these films, Albania is a country in a moment of crisis that is deciding whether to join its more “enlightened” neighbors as part of Western civilization.<sup>3</sup> To analyze *The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg* as a work of socialist realism within the Stalinist epic genre, we are relying on Katerina Clark’s *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* for insight into the typical genre tropes and structure of Soviet fiction in the Stalinist period. We are also using *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* by Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin to situate *Skanderbeg* as a colonial text within the context of the USSR’s nationality policies and relying heavily on the film’s case file in the Russian state archives for information on the power relations in its production. To analyze *Lamerica’s* construction of Albania as a space of constant national identity crisis, we are using Michel Foucault’s *Of Other Spaces*, where he introduces the concept of heterotopia that is critical to the film’s construction of space and time. We are also examining the neoliberal structure *Lamerica* comments on through the theoretical framework of Negri and Hardt’s *Empire*.

### ***Skanderbeg* Historical Background**

*The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg* was made as a result of geopolitical tensions during the Cold War. To understand why Albania, with its tiny economy and no pre-existing film production infrastructure, suddenly received a massive investment of

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Soviet Union is not usually considered part of the West in Orientalist discourse, it serves this function in *Skanderbeg*. For further discussion see Martin and Suny (2001).

money, talent and technology from the Soviet Union to make a film about their national hero, we must understand why the country was important for the USSR's geopolitical agenda. In 1948, there was a public feud between Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito and Joseph Stalin over Yugoslavia's geopolitical ambitions in the Balkans, including Tito's plans for Albania. Tito had successfully led the Yugoslav Partisans against the Nazis during World War II, and the expulsion of German forces from Yugoslavia was achieved with comparatively little help from the Red Army. As a result, he was not as dependent on the USSR for the survival of his regime, meaning he had more room to pursue his own geopolitical objectives. Tito's split with Albania began even before World War II was over, when he proposed that Balkan communist resistance fighters in Yugoslavia, Greece, Albania, and Bulgaria be unified under the command of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup> The proposal failed because of concerns that the Yugoslavs would not give an equal voice to the other parties. He was also pushing to incorporate Albania into Yugoslavia as a means of resolving the Kosovo question, but refused to consider giving Kosovo to Albania as the Albanian government proposed.<sup>5</sup> This was the first source of tensions between the Albanian and Yugoslav governments.

Meanwhile, Tito was defying Soviet foreign policy by openly supporting communist forces in the Greek Civil War despite the USSR's official neutrality policy in the war. At the same time, the Soviets had increased economic and diplomatic ties to Albania without going through Belgrade as they had done before. In this new relationship, Albania had come to view the USSR as a bulwark against Yugoslav ambitions. However, Tito and Albanian leader Enver Hoxha were still able to secretly

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<sup>4</sup> Perović, J.. "The Tito-Stalin Split: A Reassessment in Light of New Evidence." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.2 (2007): 32-63. Project MUSE. Web. 12 Apr. 2016. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>. Page 42.

<sup>5</sup> Perovic 43.

agree to let Yugoslav forces occupy military bases in southern Albania to defend against a possible Greek incursion, without informing the Soviets of this agreement.<sup>6</sup> When Stalin found out about this agreement through an informant, he not only interpreted the planned troop movement as a move to merge Albania into Yugoslavia, but also worried the West would see the troop buildup as a sign of an impending invasion of Greece and provoke international intervention against the communists.<sup>7</sup> This provoked a serious diplomatic dispute between the Soviets and Yugoslavia, during which neither side backed down. Due to these tensions, Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform in 1948 and high-ranking party officials in Albania and across Eastern Europe were purged for alleged “Titoism.”<sup>8</sup> Yugoslavia was the first socialist state to outright reject Stalin’s leadership in its foreign policy, so the Soviet government had to rely on Albania to counter Yugoslavia and enforce the security of the USSR and its allies in the Balkans. This series of events became known as the Tito-Stalin Split.

Albanian leader Enver Hoxha was among the most vocal critics of Yugoslav “revisionism” during and after the split, and one of the most repressively Stalinist Eastern Bloc rulers. Stalin could count on Hoxha’s support to counter Yugoslav ambitions in the Balkans, so just as the USSR acted as Albania’s shield against Yugoslav ambitions just before the split, Albania became the USSR’s safeguard against Yugoslav ambitions after the split. In this context, the USSR signed a special agreement with Albania to coproduce *The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg*, a historical epic about the Albanian national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, a 15th Century nobleman

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<sup>6</sup> Perovic 48.

<sup>7</sup> Perovic 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Perovic 62.

whose resistance against the Ottoman Empire's occupation of Albania earned him a reputation as a bulwark of European Christendom against foreign invaders.

*Skanderbeg* would be the first Soviet-Albanian coproduction ever, one of the most expensive and technologically advanced Albanian films ever made, and would be directed by a prestigious Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Yutkevich. The Soviet Ministry of Cinematography knew for a fact that they would never make their money back in Albania. According to a 1951 internal memo of the Ministry of Cinematography, *Skanderbeg* was budgeted at 8 million rubles, 80% of which would come from the USSR, while the entire ticket sales of Albania in 1950 amounted to only 1.5 million rubles.<sup>9</sup> Although the decision-making process of filmmakers in socialist countries can't be accurately gauged via the profit motive, these figures rule out the possibility that *Skanderbeg* was an economic "safe bet." The involvement of Yutkevich, who had political credit from his series of films about Lenin and Stalin and his tenure on a film censorship board, indicates that the film was made for a highly sensitive political reason. Most of the cast and crew, including the screenwriter, were Soviets rather than Albanians, and almost all of the Soviet cast and crew were ethnically Georgian. Because Stalin was from Georgia, Georgians were seen as superior examples of the Soviet people. Assembling a politically outstanding director with a Georgian cast, writer, and crew reflects that the film had a vital political purpose from the beginning of production, even more so than other films produced by Stalinist filmmakers of the time. The film's two purposes were to educate Albanians on how to be Soviet Albanians using the Georgian super-Soviets as embodiments of the ideal citizen, and to explain

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<sup>9</sup> Russian Archive of Literature and Arts. Film's File on *The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg*. RGALI fond 2329 opis 12 ed kh 3849. Translated by Alexander Prokhorov. Page 12-13. (Memo from V. Dulgerov to Ivan Bol'shakov dated 17 December 1951).

historically why Soviet citizens should care about Albania as a battleground in the conflict between the USSR, the West, and Yugoslavia.

The entire structure of *Skanderbeg* is a symptom of its origin in the Stalinist imperial project. The film's structure is based on the master plot of socialist realism, the officially mandated artistic method of Stalinism, and fits comfortably in the genre of the Stalinist epic leader biopic. Socialist realism was born out of literary discussions of the 1920s and became the official method of Soviet literature in 1934, at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers.<sup>10</sup> To understand how a story of a 15<sup>th</sup> Century defender of Christianity becomes socialist realist in nature, we must understand that the movement has two contradictory objectives due to its origins. The objective of the socialist realist text is to show how the protagonist, the "positive hero" according to Soviet critics' terminology, becomes a better person by embracing model modes of behavior,<sup>11</sup> a trait of the Russian novel.<sup>12</sup> As far back as Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done* (1863), Russian novels used characters to represent model modes of behavior that Russians could emulate to solve contemporary social problems. Thus, the genre was fundamentally about the present and how it differs from what ought to exist. However, during the Stalin era, socialist realist novels and films took on an increasingly mythic quality, and emphasized more and more the past achievements of remarkable heroes from the past. As a result, socialist realism combined the Russian novel's focus on model behavior of present-day people with the epic's portrayal of the exaggerated heroism of the past. When Albania was reorganized on Stalinist principles, its cinema

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, Katerina. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. 1981. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. Page 27-32.

<sup>11</sup> In this case, specifically communist modes of behavior.

<sup>12</sup> Clark 49.

imported the socialist realist model of storytelling from the USSR as well. Thus, the film that is supposedly an Albanian story is told in a Soviet style, using Soviet actors, to send a message the Soviets want to send. The film connects Albanian history with world history, “world history” being a euphemism for Soviet history and, through the clarity of Marxist historical vision, deciphers traces of Albania’s socialist future in the historical past while reaffirming its status as a shield against ambitious regional enemies.

### ***Skanderbeg and the Socialist Realist Master Plot***

The distinctive feature of *The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg* as a work of socialist realism is its adherence to the socialist realist master plot, in which a “positive hero” of modest class origins is educated to channel his or (rarely) her “spontaneity,” defined as unfocused zeal and dedication to a cause, into a more “conscious,” meaning disciplined and effective, effort to achieve his goals, by a mentor character who already has this consciousness. These goals will usually be aligned with the public good rather than individual interests. In the film, Skanderbeg is portrayed as a mentor who unites the Albanian people on the basis of shared identity rather than the old clan divisions and teaches them how to fight the Turks. The nation as a whole acts as a positive hero, as it is aware of the need to fight, but it lacks Skanderbeg’s expert knowledge and wisdom, and it is internally divided by blood feuds and hesitant noble families. Skanderbeg’s role as a mentor is clear from an early scene where a messenger comes to Adrianople to convince Skanderbeg to desert the Turkish army and lead Albania’s revolt against the Ottoman Empire. The messenger tells Skanderbeg that, “Mothers do not weep for their children slaughtered by the Turks. They wait for you.” That is to say, the nation is aware

of the need to fight the Turks, but cannot begin the revolt because Skanderbeg has not reeducated them yet. The first scene of reeducation comes when the leader uses his adoptive mother's personal tragedy to solve the ancient problem of blood feuds and organize the clans into an armed resistance against the Turks. In this scene, when Skanderbeg's adoptive mother's son is slain by a rival tribe, she wants to send her other son and husband to kill them, but Skanderbeg consoles her and spends the next 10 minutes of the film fixing the ancient, intractable tribal tensions in Albania forever because, "I did not return to see Albanians spilling Albanian blood." In this moment, he displays that he has the archetypal qualities of a socialist realist mentor: self-discipline, awareness of the broader context of his actions, and icy calm.<sup>13</sup> He is not explicitly "socialist," but his goals foreshadow what the audience knows will eventually become socialism. After making the clan representatives reconcile, he declares, "From this day forward, the sword of Albania shall pierce only enemies." This is the first moment of education when the nation begins to adopt Skanderbeg's consciousness, and the same scene depicts Skanderbeg personally arming the people and organizing them into an army.

There are other moments of ideological education throughout the film, each marking a stage in the development of the consciousness of Albania. For example, the scene in which the princes pledge their armies to Skanderbeg in Lezhë signifies the princes putting aside their differences and embracing the cause of the nation, marking a transition from looking after their individual interests towards striving for the collective goal. In another, Skanderbeg convinces his sister Mamica and the peasant Pal to forsake their mutual love so that Mamica can be married off to a prince to secure his

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<sup>13</sup> Clark 63.

allegiance. In socialist realist texts, romantic love is usually downplayed or subordinated to the goal of the hero or the community, rather than presented as an intrinsic good.<sup>14</sup> Skanderbeg teaches them to put their love aside for the nation and educates them in self-abnegation within this context.

Skanderbeg not only acts as a mentor to the masses, but also to the intellectual class. There is a pair of scenes in which Skanderbeg takes the Marxist view of linear historical progress against the Turkish scholar Laonicus' view of history as cyclical. Laonicus insists that history proceeds "just like a circle that has neither beginning nor end," in which empires and nations "come and go," regardless of the efforts of individuals, but Skanderbeg insists that "It's not time that decides, but the people." The dynamic of their discourse is the leader of the nation telling the intellectual to know his place, and discourse in this exchange is fundamentally an expression of Stalin's belief that, "Anything could be accomplished if only one tries hard enough: the laws of science are only 'blinkers' imposed on man to prevent him from reaching his full potential."<sup>15</sup> Since the intellectual is the keeper of the laws of science, they would have to subordinate themselves to the epic leader's superior consciousness and strength.

Skanderbeg's understanding of his mission transcends petty or personal disputes and reflects the idealized Soviet state. While several other Albanian characters have their own personal, emotional reasons for joining the rebellion against the Turks, only Skanderbeg is fighting for the ideal of a united, free Albania. During a wedding scene, for example, several Albanian princes discuss whether or not supporting him would make them as much money as supporting the Turks or Italians would. The scene

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<sup>14</sup> Clark 183.

<sup>15</sup> Clark 103.

implies that bourgeois Albanians are unreliable without the guidance of Skanderbeg, as their class interests prevent them from being fully integrated into the new society.

*Skanderbeg* fits the socialist realist master plot, but what makes it a Stalinist epic is that the past is a mythic model of an ideal future based on the USSR's official self-image in 1953. We know the film's version of Skanderbeg is supposed to be a model for the future socialist Albania and other socialist countries because the end of the movie directly tells us so. At the end, a blind man has traveled far to sing an epic song about Skanderbeg in his court. The song praises Skanderbeg as "Braver than the bravest," and says "Flame and gunpowder don't burn him / His sword splits mountains in two / with one swing, he wipes out an army...May all your [Skanderbeg's] enemies be destroyed / May your glory be sung throughout the generations!" The blind man asks to touch his face, and Skanderbeg responds by grabbing a random soldier and letting the blind man touch him instead. When an advisor asks why he did this, Skanderbeg says that despite his importance, he is one with the young soldier and with the Albanian people as a whole, because "If you and I die, the people will live on. They will continue the clash with the enemy and they will win." In other words, future generations will have the epic and heroic qualities the blind man sings about in his song about Skanderbeg, while the soldier's youth visually guarantees that his ideas will live on. The film immediately cuts to its final shot, showing a statue of Skanderbeg in the mountains of Albania, with the flag of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania rising in the foreground. This lets the audience know that the communist government is directly descended from Skanderbeg. An early draft of the screenplay was even less subtle in its intentions, as it was to cut from Skanderbeg to footage of an SS officer during the

German occupation, and then to the present-day Central Committee of the Albanian Party of Labor. This would have shown that the communists had acted as Skanderbeg did and expelled a foreign enemy. However, the ending was changed due to being stylistically inconsistent with the rest of the film.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the function of the ending is the same in both versions: to legitimize the power of the ruling party by showing that “the elder confers on the initiate a mandate to rule as one of the chosen few.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Time in *Skanderbeg***

Because *Skanderbeg* is a socialist realist epic, its sense of time and space must fulfill both the functions of the epic and the novel. The socialist realist text is always about the present in some way, but its goal is to build myths about the construction of a better future in communism, even though that future shows no signs of becoming more real as time goes on. Thus, *Skanderbeg* takes place on two different timescales simultaneously: a physical time in which time passes slowly and gradually, and what Mircea Eliade calls “great time,”<sup>18</sup> an epic time in which time leaps forward by the will of great leaders like Skanderbeg. Most of the characters only have access to physical time, but only Skanderbeg has access to epic time. The goal of the film is to collapse the distance between physical time and epic time by disseminating his epic qualities among the whole of Albania. He is also supposed to represent a great father<sup>19</sup> archetype, the irreplaceable father of the nation who inspires the sons of the nation to

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<sup>16</sup> RGALI fond 2329 opis 12 ed kh 3849. Page 4. (Script reviewer comments on Literary Script, dated 1951).

<sup>17</sup> Clark 179.

<sup>18</sup> Clark 146.

<sup>19</sup> The gender politics of the film will be discussed in a later section.

achieve their fullest potential. His authority as a great father comes from his sense of epic time, which gives him access to a higher reality above the reach of the scientifically observable world of physical time. This is why only Skanderbeg sees the future of Albania and why he alone always knows what is in the best interests of the country. His discussions about politics and history with the Ottoman intellectual Laonicus, for example, underscore how differently Skanderbeg views time and history. Laonicus' view of history only accounts for the existence of political entities existing temporarily on physical time, but Skanderbeg sees the masses as active participants in all historical events, motivated by a love of liberty that exists eternally. In other words, Laonicus can only see physical time, while Skanderbeg can see both physical and epic time.

At the end of the film, the difference between physical and epic time finally collapses. Although Skanderbeg is ill and obviously dying, the audience never actually sees him die. We see his proclamation that, although his body is too weak to physically lead the nation, future Albanians will be like him. Then we see his statue in the present with the flag of socialist Albania. By eliminating Skanderbeg's biological death and leaping forward to 1953, when he is immortalized in statue form, the time jump has accomplished the film's goal of linking his epic qualities with the Albanian present. It has also eliminated the inconvenient need for a transition of power to a new leader. The leader does not die because he must be eternal to have access to epic time, and because he lives on in spirit through the government represented by the flag. Even though the people, having assumed all of his positive qualities, should not need him as a mentor anymore, both he and his inheritors in the socialist government are eternal. However, he *must* die so that he can ascend into history with the other great fathers,

where he can continue to guide future generations into epic time. This contradiction in the film's use of time is at the heart of socialist realism; it is impossible to show the "withering away" of the state that Marx predicted while that same state is only growing more totalitarian and powerful with time. This film specifically must resolve the contradiction between its need to show Skanderbeg as a model for the superior, Sovietized Albania that supposedly already exists in 1953 and its need to legitimize Enver Hoxha as the strong leader Albanians need to help them become Sovietized. The film resolves this contradiction by simply ignoring that it exists, jumping past Skanderbeg's biological death into the bright future, where both he and socialist Albania exist as symbols, despite their separation by hundreds of years of physical time. This is the real purpose of epic time: to bridge the gap between physical reality and the utopian future.

The structure of time in *Skanderbeg* is designed to convey a Stalinist epic notion of history, which posits that all of history is about progressing towards an ideal future. The socialist realist mentor figure must the country forward through his force of will, and any social conflicts or background information that complicates this narrative is either forgotten or fed into his narrative. In *Skanderbeg*, history is about one thing only: how he alone rallied the people behind him, raised them into consciousness, and set them on the course to the glorious future of 1953. The film is split into several periods, each of which is about one of his accomplishments in forging the future Albania. The film has no time to show how Albanians overcame deep-rooted, enormous social problems like tribalism, because that would mean that change can be gradual, imperfect, and driven by forces other than the will of an individual leader. Therefore, decades-long processes

like the end of tribalism are resolved in 10 minutes. Even the historic work of others, such as the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini,<sup>20</sup> which codified the traditional laws of independent Albania, is presented to Skanderbeg solely so that he can appear to take credit for it. The implementation of the Kanun and its impact on Albanian society are never mentioned again. All of these momentous changes in Albanian society are credited to the leader and take a couple of minutes to take effect, after which the narrative skips forward another few years, which tells the viewer that all of the changes were lasting and permanent. All of the changes Skanderbeg makes to society cause the film to shift into epic time for long enough to smooth over any problems in the transition between the old traditions and the brighter future.

### **Space in *Skanderbeg***

*Skanderbeg's* vision of Albania is largely composed of sweeping vistas glimpsed from the top of enormous mountains, rugged terrain, and mighty castles. From this one might assume that space in *Skanderbeg* serves the same function that it does in many epic films, Stalinist or otherwise: it provides an epic stage on which epic things happen. However, it also serves the ideological goals of the film. Albania as a space is also established to have very clear borders, and everyone who exists inside those borders is either an Albanian or a foreigner. In addition, the film separates good Albanians from

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<sup>20</sup> The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini is a set of traditional Albanian customary laws that evolved over time to bring law to remote villages with varying customs. Topics include how to properly mediate in a blood feud and the rules of proper hospitality. It is named after Lekë Dukagjini because he codified many of the existing laws, although there are other kanuns attributed to other authors, including Skanderbeg. The kanun was abandoned when the communist government reorganized the legal system. Source: Bracewell, C. W. Review of *The Code of Lekë Dukagjini*, trans. Leonard Fox. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 71.1 (1993): 166–168. Web.

bad Albanians by placing the good Albanians higher in vertical space, usually on mountains.

There are both historical and ideological reasons for the film's emphasis on mountains. Albania is heavily mountainous, and the Albanian partisans had fought their guerilla war against the Nazis by taking advantage of the mountainous terrain, so it makes sense that mountains would be significant in a film's construction of Albanian national identity. Even the opening credits of the film construct Albanian identity around mountains. Epic music plays, a massive, ornate castle door opens to reveal a mountain range, and the title rises from the mountains. The mountains are now associated with all of the concepts contained within the title, *The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg*: greatness, Albanian identity, prowess in battle, and Skanderbeg, the father of the nation. The first scene of the film depicts the Turkish raid in which they take young Skanderbeg away from his noble family to raise him as a janissary.<sup>21</sup> Before the Turks take him away, his father shows him a vast mountain range and says, "Behold, my son! This is your fatherland!" When Skanderbeg tells the messenger and future aide Tanush Topia he is defecting from Turkey, he says, "Soon we will be dancing in our mountains of Albania," and when he returns to Albania, he must ascend a mountain. In addition, scenes reflecting the development of the Albanian people's consciousness, including the end of tribalism, usually take place outdoors in mountainous terrain. Other mountainous scenes depicting the people's development include the initial arming of the peasants, Skanderbeg convincing Pal to arrange a political marriage between Mamica and a prince, and the wedding scene where the wavering princes are made to leave the

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<sup>21</sup> The janissaries were an elite honor guard of the Ottoman sultan, with a separate command structure from the regular Ottoman military. Janissary recruits were kidnapped as children from the noble families of conquered territories and raised to be elite soldiers.

League of Lezhë. The Albanians win their most partisan-like victory in the defense of Krujë when they hide in the mountains and drop rubble on the Turks, turning the mountains themselves into a weapon.

The cities and lower topographies, by contrast, are presented in the film as the territory of anti-Albanians and untrustworthy or wavering Albanians. The first meeting of the princes in Lezhë takes place in the city, and all of them are depicted as petty, divided, and easily bought, except for the poorer princes who rule in the mountains. The only prince who is completely devoted to the cause of defeating the Turks, Gjergj Arianiti, is shown entering the city with mountains behind him. Scenes taking place in interiors without direct views of the Albanian mountains are also associated with treachery and other moral failings. For example, Venice, a very low-lying city, is shown to be the domain of the effeminate, treacherous Italian bourgeoisie. In addition, the court of the Serbian king Branković, who plants doubts in Hamza's mind to cause him to defect, is a relatively dark, cavernous interior, and the scene where Hamza finally decides to defect to the Turks also takes place indoors. The only interior scenes containing important positive moments in the development of Albanian consciousness are when Skanderbeg signs the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini and the ending scene containing the blind man's song and Skanderbeg's ascension into being a statue. However, Lekë makes it clear that the Kanun is merely a compilation of "the laws of the free highlanders," so it still comes from the mountains, and the ending scene takes place in an open room with a view of the mountains, until it cuts to the statue of Skanderbeg, which is on a pedestal and shot from a low angle that raises it above the mountain in the background.

The thematic link between the Albanian people's socialist consciousness and the mountains is one of the ways *Skanderbeg* attempts to attach Albanian identity to the Soviet Union. By linking socialism and the Albanian mountains, a cornerstone of traditional culture and identity, the film establishes socialism as an organic part of Albanian tradition, such that being more in touch with the mountains (and thus, traditional Albanian culture) makes one a better socialist. In addition, as previously discussed, the end of the film places Skanderbeg above even the mountains, which furthers its depiction of him as an ideal Stalinist great father, whose extraordinary consciousness places him beyond what is possible for even the highest achievers.

### **Militarization of Albanian bodies in *Skanderbeg***

As *Skanderbeg's* objective is to Sovietize Albanians by reinterpreting its military history as a prototype for Stalinist Albania, it exercises control over Albanian bodies by reorganizing them around the military and its strong leader. In the mise-en-scene, Skanderbeg towers above all other characters because of the actor's considerable natural height. When Skanderbeg speaks, all of the other characters freeze and look at him. The film also consistently uses low-angle shots to emphasize his epic stature. For example, during the scene in which Skanderbeg reconciles the Albanian tribes, the camera frames the two tribal representatives in a medium shot with Skanderbeg in the middle. Then they drink, the camera travels into a low-angle shot and the music swells as they reconcile. In this scene, Skanderbeg is raising the stature of the Albanian people to be as epic as he is. The extras in the scene are all organized into stiff, regimented rows around Skanderbeg even before they are given military training. Later on, Skanderbeg declares that he "feels himself," for the first time in 20 years,

whereupon he tears off his Turkish military uniform and reveals that he has been wearing his Albanian peasant clothes all along. The peasants, who are all wearing the same clothes and still standing in strictly ordered rows, cheer in an enthusiastic but orderly and disciplined manner. In this scene, Skanderbeg's cultural identity as an Albanian is tied to the uniform he wears.

At the end of the film, the uniform returns when Skanderbeg selects the young soldier wearing it to represent him to the blind man. The peasant soldier, as a symbol of the Albanian people, is wearing their traditional dress. Their culture is worn as a uniform, which means the uniform has become their identity. By regimenting the Albanian peasantry before they are even trained in combat and organizing their bodies around the towering stature of the great leader, *Skanderbeg* militarizes even the peacetime conduct of Albanian bodies. This form of body organization is a physical representation of the film's Stalinist colonial project of developing a new, Sovietized Albanian by reinterpreting Albania's history as a precursor to the Soviets' superior Marxist-Leninist society.

The transformative effect Skanderbeg's militarization of Albanian bodies has on their character is reflected in every scene containing Italian or Turkish characters. The bodies of Italian and Turkish leaders consistently reflect their inferiority compared to the ideal of Skanderbeg's towering, sculpted male figure. For example, when the League of Lezhë visits the Doge of Venice to ask for help against the Turks, the Doge is depicted as highly ineffectual and feminine. The contrast in bodies is evident early in the scene. The statuesque, militarized Albanian figures holding the flag and shields of Skanderbeg's army are shot at a 45-degree angle, giving them increased presence in

all three dimensions, while in the next shot, we see the Doge and the Senate at a much flatter angle, minimizing their depth to the point where they merge with the background. The Senators' loose costumes conceal their figures so that their masculinity is less obvious. The only Italian body that is always clearly, visibly male is Filelfo, the bearded poet who passionately declares his personal respect for Skanderbeg and stresses the need for solidarity with Albania. The Doge, who has the most vast and loose costume, is so physically undefined that one cannot be sure he even has a male body. He also speaks with an exaggeratedly frail, feminine voice, to the point where he barely enunciates his words, whether in Albanian or in a Latin prayer.<sup>22</sup> His order to the Senate to send fabrics to Albania, "to cover their nakedness," draws attention to the costume choices that unambiguously show the masculinity of Skanderbeg's soldiers while calling the gender of the ineffectual Italians into question. Through these choices in the mise-en-scene and dialogue, the film demonstrates the superiority of Skanderbeg's soldiers by elevating their masculinity while portraying the villain as frail and feminine.

### **Villains as Markers of non-Albanian Traits**

As with the Italian example, the external enemies of *Skanderbeg* serve as foils for Albanian identity by reflecting various deficiencies Albanians should avoid if they want to become good Soviets. Venetians, as mentioned before, are depicted as effeminate, cunning, individualistic, and greedy. Turks are depicted as a Mongol-like horde of Oriental barbarians led by the morbidly obese and wealthy Sultans, and Serbs

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<sup>22</sup> This sexist depiction of the villain as feminine would seem to contradict the USSR and socialist Albania's stated dedication to gender equality. This will be discussed in more detail in the section, "Gender Politics of Villainy in Skanderbeg."

are depicted as homoerotic, arrogant, and cruel. All of these qualities are anathema to the Soviet model of Albanian identity represented by Skanderbeg.

In its depiction of Italians, the film recycles anti-Semitic rhetoric and imagery from Nazi cinema to construct the “weak” Italians. This is especially odd considering communist society’s avowedly anti-Nazi rhetoric. The film uses the imagery of the feminized, cosmopolitan Jewish male that dominated Nazi films like *Jud Süß* (Harlan, 1940) to depict the unreliable Italians precisely because of its connotations of disloyalty and rootless cosmopolitanism. According to Sander Gilman’s *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Jewish males are portrayed in anti-Semitic “as possessing all of the qualities usually ascribed to the woman (or indeed the homosexual)...the Jew is a male who acts like a female.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, Gilman is arguing that the Jewish male is identified with femininity and homosexuality, both traits depicted within anti-Semitic, not to mention misogynistic, cultures as abnormal or dangerous in males. In *Skanderbeg*, Italians are depicted as effeminate, cunning and greedy capitalists who are dangerous because they sow disloyalty to the nation. In the first meeting of the princes in Lezhë, the Italian characters evaluate how easy it would be to buy the loyalty of each prince. Both characters are clean-shaven, in contrast to the magnificently bearded and mustached Albanian princes, and both dressed in the relatively formless garments of the priesthood and the bourgeoisie.

Another scene showing the ineffectual nature of Italian masculinity takes place in the Venetian Senate. In this scene, the disagreements the Senators have to arming Albania against the Turks are about how “Turks do not hinder my trade,” but the Turks

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<sup>23</sup> Gilman, Sander. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. Page 119.

would hinder trade if Venice armed the League of Lezhë. We also see them poisoning the pro-Skanderbeg prince Lek Zaharia to take his land, associating Italians with cunning acts of sabotage as opposed to direct combat. Their role as agents of corruption is explored in the wedding scene, where the disloyal Albanian princes propose allying with the Turks to save their economic interests.<sup>24</sup> These disloyal princes share the same characteristics of Italians: cunning, greed, and selfishness, although they are not presented as effeminate. The film shows that these Merchants of Venice can be fought by exposing their allies and publicly shaming them, as Skanderbeg does when he accuses the princes of trying “to sell the honor of Albania at the market.”

The anti-Semitic imagery of *Skanderbeg* echoes imagery present in Nazi propaganda films like *Jud Süß*, but because it is used to discuss Italian Catholics rather than Jews and because of the official rhetoric of the communist movement against anti-Semitism, no one could call it anti-Semitic imagery even though it is. Whether or not the anti-Semitism in the depiction of Venice was consciously intended, it is clearly there because Stalinist ideology requires an enemy that has these traits. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union was alive and well. The film was made at the height of the so-called anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the USSR, in which Soviet Jewish writers and leaders were purged because Stalin was convinced of a Zionist conspiracy against him.<sup>25</sup> As representatives of the merchant class, the Venetians are understood to be untrustworthy because they are capitalists, they are cunning and

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<sup>24</sup> Incidentally, one of the few Albanian actors in this scene, Marie Logoreci, had blood relatives in the USA, one of whom would meet another Albanian-American at a California screening of *Skanderbeg* in 1954. They would eventually get married and have a son, who would go back to Albania to work in the film industry. Read the conclusion of this thesis to find out more about this family's contribution to Albanian film history.

<sup>25</sup> Azadovskii, K. and Egorov, B. "From Anti-Westernism to Anti-Semitism: Stalin and the Impact of the 'Anti-Cosmopolitan' Campaigns on Soviet Culture." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4.1 (2002): 66-80. Project MUSE. Web.

mostly averse to physical violence, as opposed to the militarized and courageous Albanians under Skanderbeg, and they are individually selfish, as opposed to Albanians, who work for the common good. They are also depicted as ineffectually religious in the Senate scene, when they praise God for Skanderbeg's victory over the Turks while refusing to actually do anything to help him.

The Turks, meanwhile, represent a direct threat of external invasion against which Albanians fight to form their national identity. Whereas the Italian enemies represent the corruption of foreign values such as capitalism and individual self-interest, the Turks represent the more direct threat of invasion and subjugation from outside. While the Italians are interested in the economic wealth of Albania, the Turks are interested in conquering Albania in order to access the rest of Europe. The Ottoman armies are depicted as horse-riding barbarians with Asiatic features and bad teeth, who fight for the pleasure of burning houses, enslaving children, and destroying ancient sculptures. The first intertitle even calls them "the Turkish hordes," horde being a word derived from Turkic languages<sup>26</sup> and used to describe highly destructive Central Asian nomadic armies. They are also depicted with other traditional Orientalist imagery that usually accompanies the Turks in literature. For example, after Hamza betrays Skanderbeg, he is depicted in a lavish tent, being served wine by multiple submissive and alluring harem girls, with a thin black boy in the background, perhaps for decoration. The Turks frequently invoke the name of Allah to praise their own decisions, and make derisive comments about Christians. The Sultan's son in particular is depicted as a psychotically violent bigot who dreams of "scalding the entire world without mercy" and rejects the friendship of Christians. The scene in which Hasan Bey

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<sup>26</sup> Horde. *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web.

receives Skanderbeg at his castle begins with an establishing shot of the word “Allah” written in Arabic script above his table, thus linking his villainy with Islam as a religion. Despite the anti-Western, anti-religious stance of Stalinist ideology and the film’s own anti-Christian stance, the film frames Skanderbeg’s rebellion as a struggle between Western Christianity and the Muslim hordes because that narrative has historically gained him admiration throughout Christian Europe.<sup>27</sup> The depiction of the Turks is used to present an Orientalized enemy the Albanians must militarize themselves to fight.

The third enemy depicted in *Skanderbeg* is Serbia. The Serbian king Branković is depicted as just as cunning and self-interested as the Venetians, but as arrogant and aggressive as the Turks. As opposed to the Venetians, who undermine the League for their own economic interests, Branković refuses to ally with Albania because he is insulted that a shepherd has asked him to break with his powerful Turkish allies. Whereas the Venetians only manage to corrupt a few princes, Branković is responsible for causing Skanderbeg’s brother Hamza to defect. This makes the Serbs much more dangerous than the Italians, as they are able to manipulate Albanians on a psychological level rather than with the comparatively crude method of bribery. Compared to the Italians’ effete mannerisms, Branković is a masculine and highly proactive ruler whose angry outbursts are more like those of the Turkish Sultan’s son than an Italian. He also displays a vaguely threatening homoeroticism by touching Hamza’s breastplate when he expresses admiration for his courage. Branković’s homoeroticism, like the Italians’ femininity, contrasts sharply with Skanderbeg’s idealized heterosexual masculinity.

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<sup>27</sup> Elsie, Robert. *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology, and Folk Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2001. Page 122.

The villainous depiction of Branković is a direct result of the Tito-Stalin split we have discussed earlier, which placed Yugoslavia in opposition to Albania and the USSR and made Tito an adversary of both governments. The two dogs present in the scene evoke Tito's own dogs, so much so that the script reviewer at the Soviet Ministry of Cinematography wanted the dogs removed because the parallel would be too superficial.<sup>28</sup> However, a 1953 memo criticizes the actor playing Branković for only emphasizing the despotism of the character, to the detriment of his other qualities, such as arrogance, cruelty, and hunger for power.<sup>29</sup> These memos prove how important the parallelism between Branković and Tito was to the producers despite him only appearing in one scene. Branković's role as the most dangerous sponsor of treason in Albania evokes Hoxha's accusations that victims of his purges were agents of a Titoist conspiracy.<sup>30</sup> It also accomplishes one of the key goals of the Soviet producers: to represent Albania as a bulwark of correctly practiced socialism in contrast to Yugoslavia's disobedience to Stalin.

Taken together, the three enemies of Albania define the ideal Albanian by appearing as foils to Skanderbeg's correctly practiced Albanian identity. The weak, effeminate, greedy Italians demonstrate that the ideal Albanian should be strong, masculine, and collectivist. The barbaric Turks are the external enemy that justifies the militarization of Albanian identity, and the villainous Serbian king is a highly specific topical warning that Yugoslavia is an enemy as dangerous as the Turks.

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<sup>28</sup> RGALI fond 2329 opis 12 ed kh 3849. Page 6. (Script reviewer comments on Literary Script, dated 1951).

<sup>29</sup> RGALI fond 2329 opis 12 ed kh 3849. Page 192. (Memo on rushes from Head of Feature Film Production V. Surin to Chief Editor I. Kokorina, dated 1953).

<sup>30</sup> Hoxha, Enver. "Third Meeting With Stalin (November 1949)," *With Stalin: Memoirs from my Meetings with Stalin*. Tirana: 8 Nëntori Publishing House, 1975. Marxists Internet Archive, 2000. Web.

### **Gender politics of villainy in *Skanderbeg***

All three enemies of Albania also represent defective models of masculinity opposing Skanderbeg's strong, traditional masculinity. This problematizes the film's claim that Skanderbeg is a model for a new socialist Albanian, since socialist theorists claim that gender oppression is a product of the class system, and will therefore begin to disappear when the capitalist system is overthrown. This adds another contradiction to the film's goal of being both a representation of Albania's past and the bright future of socialism. Skanderbeg is idealized as the strong man, in contrast to the Italians, who are depicted as weak and feminine. The Turks are depicted as hyper-masculine barbarians of the Orient and the Serbian king is depicted as dangerously homoerotic. These images would seem to contradict the official gender politics of the Albanian socialist government. For example, in a 1955 address to the Fourth Congress of the Women's Union of Albania, Enver Hoxha said, "the canons of the Sharia and of the Church, closely linked with the laws of the bourgeoisie, treated woman as a commodity, a thing to be bought and sold by the male, who was mercilessly exploited, and did not dare open her mouth to express a thought or say a word, but had only one right: to bear children and to slave day and night."<sup>31</sup> Here Hoxha negatively identifies Islam and Christianity with traditional gender roles while denouncing these roles as oppressive. Nevertheless, the film reinforces those roles by modeling its ideal Albanian citizen on traditional masculinity, subordinating the female characters to him, and feminizing his enemies. The only female characters of note are Skanderbeg's wife, whose sole

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<sup>31</sup> Hoxha, Enver. "Greeting to the 4th Congress of the WUA." *Enver Hoxha Selected Works* vol. 2 (November 1948 - November 1965). Tirana: 8 Nëntori Publishing House, 1975. Marxists Internet Archive. PDF. Page 445.

purpose in the plot is to provide him with a son, his sister, whose first appearance shows her “plowing the fields like a true villager,” in the words of one character, but whose actual purpose to the plot is to allow Skanderbeg to marry her off to secure the loyalty of an Albanian prince, and the mother who brings the rival clans together to resolve the blood feud. While the scene sets up the mother as key to the scene by showing Skanderbeg pleading with her to forgive the rival clan, even this act is subordinated to Skanderbeg, as only his education in superior values allows her to forgive the rival clan, and he is the one who ultimately presides over the reconciliation. The result is that the film actually upholds traditional gender roles as key to the fight against religious law, the opposite of Hoxha’s assertion that these gender roles are a symptom of religious domination of the country. While perhaps the film can afford to be uncritical of traditional gender roles because it’s a feudal-era historical epic about a central male character, it is still trying to construct an ahistorical portrait of Skanderbeg as the idealized socialist. This idealized socialist masculinity depends on the feminization of the enemies of Albania and the subordination of the good to the male characters. As a result, the film sacrifices a portion of the socialist government’s vision of the ideal man of the future in order to ground his authority in the traditions of the past.

### **So Who is Albanian?**

The film’s enemies define who is not Albanian, but the purpose of the film is to define who is Albanian, and this is where the USSR’s colonizing gaze on Albania is most clear. *Skanderbeg* fits within the official Soviet nationality policy in the Lenin and early Stalin eras, which was to encourage the nationalism of non-Russian ethnolinguistic groups in the USSR using positive discrimination. The desired effect of

this policy was that these nations would see Soviet power as something that developed naturally in their own nations rather than something imposed by Russian imperialism. The Bolsheviks did this by appointing members of those nations to local government posts and by financing education and literature in non-Russian languages. Lenin and Stalin supported this policy in order to ease the peoples' mistrust of Russia as a "kulak and oppressor nation,"<sup>32</sup> analogizing the Russian Empire to the Russian landlord peasant class the Soviet government was bent on liquidating. They also believed the policy would prevent the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations from leading counter-revolutionary independence movements against Russia. In Stalin's words, "We are undertaking the maximum development of national culture, so that it would exhaust itself completely and thereby create the base for the organization of international socialist culture."<sup>33</sup> That is to say, the promotion of minority languages and culture within the USSR would prevent nationalist uprisings against it later on. However, starting in 1932, this policy was abandoned due to the Holodomor, a catastrophic famine that the Soviet government alleged was caused by Ukrainian nationalist kulaks. As the discourse of positive discrimination dropped from official discourse, the official rhetoric on nationalities changed from constructionism, emphasizing the class origins of national borders, to essentialism, emphasizing the deep historic roots of all Soviet nationalities.

*Skanderbeg* is an essentialist text that integrates Albania into the Soviet empire as one of these peripheral nationalities. As discussed previously, *Skanderbeg* somehow remains a perfect, secular, Sovietized Albanian despite having been taken from his

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<sup>32</sup> Martin, Terry, and Ronald Grigor Suny. *A State Of Nations : Empire And Nation-Making In The Age Of Lenin And Stalin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 6 Apr. 2016. Page 68.

<sup>33</sup> Martin 70.

people and raised among the elite of a Turkish caliphate for his entire life. However, Hamza, despite being his blood relative, and despite displaying a similar level of military prowess and courage, does not demonstrate Skanderbeg's teleological sense of time, and is unable to put aside his jealousy of Skanderbeg's royal seniority to serve the collective interest. Thus, he succumbs to the charms of the Orientalized Turks. The only difference in the background of Skanderbeg and Hamza is that Hamza, as the Serbian king reminds us, was born in Turkey. This further demonstrates that the film's sense of Albanian identity is tied to its construction of Albania as a frontier space between the pro-Soviet countries and the Orientalized outside world. This space, which functions as an extension of the USSR's geopolitical power, must have strictly defined borders, and everyone born beyond those borders must be seen as inherently different, regardless of their blood ties to the nation and its constituent ethnicities. The film also emphasizes certain Albanian national traditions such as their traditional clothing, wedding dances and folk dances. These scenes are pivotal because they convince the audience that the impetus for the film's production came from Albanian national identity, even while it rewrites Albanian history into the context of international socialist culture.

One of the many folk dancing scenes provides a perfect case study in the marriage between traditional Albanian identity and socialism. When Skanderbeg reconciles the clans and arms the people, for example, a mass folk dance takes place. The dance connects Albanian folk traditions with the strong leader, integrating a character based on a very modern Stalinist ideology with a timeless tradition. It also ties the preservation of Albanian identity to the presence of a strong leader. Outside the film-specific meaning of the scene, circle dances also have a very specific meaning in the

mythology of communist partisans. These are usually folk dances, which integrate the communists into preexisting national traditions and identity. The group nature of the dance improves unit cohesion and makes them relatable as human beings, not just as fighters. This iconography can be seen in cinematic depictions of partisans in other countries. In the early Yugoslav partisan film *Kozara* (1962), a new group of partisans swears an oath of service before facing the Germans, and concludes the oath by breaking into a kolo, a South Slavic form of circle dance. The kolo unites the major characters of the story with the new recruits on the basis of shared knowledge of a national tradition. This technique can still be found in the 21st Century in online propaganda videos supporting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)<sup>34</sup> and their Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG).<sup>35</sup> These videos commonly feature guerillas from these groups performing a govend, a traditional Kurdish dance, alongside locals in territory they control. These videos establish the guerillas' place as a participant in Kurdish culture, cementing their self-proclaimed role as defenders of Kurdish identity.<sup>36</sup> The folk dancing in *Skanderbeg* performs the same function for the Albanians in the story, uniting the individual characters and their goals into the collective and the traditions of the nation. The placement of partisan iconography in the 15th Century also reinforces the timelessness of the Hoxha government and its place as an heir to Skanderbeg as the defender of Albanian national traditions.

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<sup>34</sup> HPG-Online. "Koma Penaber - Sevgan Roboski Govenda Azadiye." Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 6 October 2011. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_nD3UGPecGE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nD3UGPecGE)

<sup>35</sup> Gerîla TV. Koma Botan - Em Bernadin Vê Govendê." Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 31 July 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7\\_1cAZH5\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7_1cAZH5_8)

<sup>36</sup> As the PKK is listed as a terrorist group by the United States, Turkey, and several other countries, it cannot be stressed enough that this paper does not in any way endorse the content of these videos. They merely serve an illustrative purpose, demonstrating the continued political use of traditional circle dancing by leftist insurgencies in the present day.

### Skanderbeg as Mosaic Authority Figure

The film also grounds *Skanderbeg's* authority in older storytelling traditions by linking him to Moses as depicted in the Book of Exodus. On the most surface level, the film's central character is separated from his enslaved ethnicity at birth and raised in a privileged position with direct access to the highest ranks of the government oppressing his people. He then betrays the oppressors to lead his original people in a revolt against them. After the revolt succeeds in establishing a contiguous territory, he becomes a giver of law and enforces correct behavior by forcibly ending traditional practices that contradict the new laws. Skanderbeg's white beard and flowing robes also associate him with cinematic depictions of Moses, such as in the 1923 American film *The Ten Commandments*. Skanderbeg's Mosaic model of authority as a military and political leader who gives the law to the people and ends old, incorrect behaviors is perfect for a socialist government's attempts to eliminate blood feuds and religious law. It associates the new socialist man not only with the national hero, but also with an iconic figure of both Christianity and Islam, Albania's two most common religions. The association, intentional or otherwise,<sup>37</sup> with *Ten Commandments* also gives the film itself added legitimacy as a real historical epic on the level of famous Hollywood films. While the USSR had its own tradition of historical epics with films like *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, *Skanderbeg's* Moses parallel associates the film more directly with the Hollywood biblical epic. To cement the new socialist hero's authority and authenticity in Albanian culture, the film integrates itself with traditional Albanian gender roles and folk dances, while the model of Skanderbeg's leadership refers back to the religious

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<sup>37</sup> We lack direct evidence of Yutkevich ever seeing *Ten Commandments*, but there are nonetheless visual and thematic associations between the two works.

authority of Moses and the film's own cinematic lineage in biblical epics, even though the film itself carries an anti-religious message.

### **Conclusions on *Skanderbeg*: Where is the Colonial Gaze?**

All of the attributes of *Skanderbeg* discussed above, from its teleological sense of time to its militarization of Albanian bodies to the endless, interminable dancing scenes, come from the colonial gaze of the Soviet Union towards Albania, which manifests on both textual and metatextual levels. The film projects its textual colonial gaze onto Skanderbeg himself, a man of the future who gazes at his backward nation from his naturally privileged position in time and space and challenges the people to improve themselves to be more like him. In other words, Skanderbeg functions as an Orientalist, meaning a supposedly enlightened man who studies Albania specifically to determine how it is different from, and therefore inferior to, the USSR. Edward Said describes Orientalists as Western academics in a superior position of power who have, “the ambition to formulate their discoveries, experiences, and insights suitably in modern terms, to put ideas about the Orient in very close touch with modern realities.”<sup>38</sup> This is the essence of Skanderbeg's colonial gaze. The film contrasts Skanderbeg's gaze with the more explicitly Orientalized barbarism of the Turks, framing the rebellion as a conflict between enlightened civilization and the inferior Oriental hordes. Despite the film's anti-religious ideology, it still uses the traditional Western European imagery of Skanderbeg as a defender of Christianity against Muslim invaders. Thus, Skanderbeg's gaze is a civilizing force that lifts Albania out of the Orient and integrates it into the broader context of world history, meaning Soviet history. In this supposedly Albanian

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<sup>38</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1977. Print. Page 44.

film, with all its folk dancing and blood feuds, Albanian identity is subordinated to the needs of the Stalinist empire, and the country itself becomes an outer component of the empire.

On a metatextual level, the film's production process reflects the same colonizing gaze. As previously stated, the Georgian cast and crew are showing Albanians how to be better members of their own national community by becoming model Soviet citizens. In the process, Albanian identity is redefined as an inferior version of Soviet identity. The unequal nature of the co-production is evident from a 1952 production memo that mandates the Albanian dubbing of the film should be true to the original Russian version, and that the negative would theoretically be the common property of the USSR and Albania, but would actually be stored in Moscow, making it very clear who this film actually belongs to.<sup>39</sup> There is also a series of strongly worded memos exchanged between the Soviet writers and Albanian advisors on the subject. Fatmir Gjata, Chairman of the Committee for Arts and Culture of Albania, asked the writers to remove the depiction of blood feuds, but the head of Mosfilm, S. Kuznetsov, insisted they keep the scene, because it added dramatic tension and because the topic of blood feuds was relevant in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and was still relevant in the present.<sup>40</sup> In this exchange, we see the Soviet producers determine what is and is not "relevant" to present-day Albania, disregarding the complaints of the Albanian advisor hired specifically to answer this question. This discourse demonstrates the Orientalist mindset of the producers, as they point to an example of Albanian backwardness that can only be solved by the

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<sup>39</sup> RGALI fond 2329 opis 12 ed kh 3849. Page 37. (Agreement between Sovexport Film and Albanian Committee for Arts and Culture).

<sup>40</sup> RGALI fond 2329 opis 12 ed kh 3849. Page 100-111, 127-128. (Letter from Fatmir Gjata to Mosfilm dated 23 October 1952, Letter by S. Kuznetsov dated 18 November 1952).

intervention of a superior culture (represented by Skanderbeg), and insist that the problem remains today, which implicitly means the country requires more intervention from the USSR.

### **Introduction to *Lamerica***

The totalitarian model of colonial gaze present in *Skanderbeg* is only one way in which foreign film producers have envisioned Albania as a target of Western intervention. The 1994 Italian film *Lamerica*, which is about a fraudster who is stranded in post-communist Albania alongside a former gulag inmate who turns out to be a deserter from Mussolini's invasion of Albania, is a much more complicated, comparatively well-intentioned and humanistic film compared to *Skanderbeg*, but it is still insidiously colonial in its depiction of Albania despite its attempts to respect the struggles of everyday Albanians and to criticize Italy's fascist-era and more recent colonial exploitation of Albania. As with *Skanderbeg*, we must understand the historical context of the producer's relationship with Albania at the time of production to understand the film's objectives.

Like *Skanderbeg*, *Lamerica* was released at a moment when Albania's relationship with its neighbors was rapidly changing. Historically, Italian governments have been colonizing parts of Albania since the 15th Century, when the Republic of Venice controlled parts of the west coast of Albania. Additionally, Italy invaded Albania in World War II and instituted a fascist puppet state, so it had already been directly colonized by Italy by the time the film was made. The film was created in the midst of a chain of momentous events in Italian and Albanian history: the collapse of the Albanian

communist government, the subsequent Italian migrant crisis of the 1990s, and Italy's emergence as a critical part of Albania's new neoliberal economy. The communist government collapsed in 1991, and the ensuing chaos caused a 28% reduction in the country's GDP<sup>41</sup> and a mass exodus of its citizens to Italy. This crisis was so enormous that within six days, 10,619 Albanians had landed in the Italian region of Puglia by boat.<sup>42</sup> By 2004, Albanians were 13.2% of all foreign nationals in Italy, making them the leading registered foreign population.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Albania was economically dependent on foreign aid from Western European states, which was roughly equal to its yearly tax revenues. About 60% of all foreign investment in the struggling economy was from Italy, making Albania economically dependent on Italy.<sup>44</sup> At the same time that Albania was becoming reliant on Italy, Italian politicians were gradually adopting anti-immigrant rhetoric. Italians stereotyped all Albanians as criminals based on reports of the particularly brutal sex trafficking practiced by the Albanian mafia,<sup>45</sup> the involvement of the Italian mafia in the trafficking of Albanian migrants,<sup>46</sup> and the endemic corruption of Albanian law enforcement.<sup>47</sup> Other stereotypes used to depict Albanians included a perceived lack of willingness to work, due to high unemployment among Albanians in Italy, and a perception that Albanians were backwards, poorer versions of Italians, much like the negative image of Sicilians.<sup>48</sup> In totality, Italy looked at Albania of the early

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<sup>41</sup> Kushnir, Ivan. "Gross Domestic Product (GDP); Albania, 1970-2014." Kushnirs.org. Ivan Kushnir's World Macroeconomic Research. 2014. Web.

<sup>42</sup> Perlmutter, Ted. "The Politics of Proximity: The Italian Response to the Albanian Crisis". *The International Migration Review* 32.1 (1998): 203–222. Web. Page 203.

<sup>43</sup> Chaloff, Jonathan. "Albania and Italy: Migration policies and their development relevance." *Centro Studi di Politico Internazionale*. 51 (2008): 4-37. Web. Page 6.

<sup>44</sup> Perlmutter 207.

<sup>45</sup> Chaloff 16.

<sup>46</sup> Perlmutter 212.

<sup>47</sup> Chaloff 16.

<sup>48</sup> Perlmutter 212-213.

1990s as a backward, impoverished place where civilization and good government were absent, even as Italian investment replaced the communist Albanian economic structures with Western European capitalist economic structures. In other words, Italy looked at Albania with a colonial gaze.

### ***Lamerica's* opening scene: the Illusion of Benevolence**

*Lamerica* argues from the very first scene that it is engaged in a deconstruction of the colonial gaze. It begins with a fascist Italian newsreel from 1939 announcing the victory of the Italian Army in their invasion of Albania and the formation of an Albanian fascist state. The voiceover declares that Italy's invasion is saving the backward Albanians from the "misgovernment of King Zog" and bringing them civilization in the form of new hospitals, roads, and other infrastructure. In other words, the newsreel is explicitly constructing a colonialist narrative in which enlightened Italy is heroically civilizing Albania by forcibly taking control of the country and its people. The newsreel plays side by side with another frame containing the opening credits, an intrusion of the modern day filmmakers into the fascist mise-en-scene signifying that the filmmakers intend the film to act as a critical rereading of the fascist colonial gaze.

When the credits end, the film cuts from the newsreel to an establishing shot of a desperate crowd of refugees in the Albanian port city of Durrës in 1991, chanting "Italy, Italy, you are the world!" The camera pans to the border gate and we see an Albanian man in a suit, Selimi, on his way to meet two Italian capitalists for a business venture. They are Fiore, a light-haired Northern Italian man who will eventually come to symbolize an exploitative and unexamined Italian colonial gaze, and Gino, a younger

Sicilian man who, with the help of an old Italian prisoner of war, Michele, will come to symbolize a more humble and benevolent version of Italian identity. The transition between these scenes connects the contemporary Albanian migrant crisis in Italy to the fascist invasion of Albania, establishing that Italy still holds disproportionate power over the lives of Albanians in their own country. By reminding the audience of the historical colonial relationship between Italy and Albania, the scene encourages critical thinking about the rest of the film. Nevertheless, even as *Lamerica* explicitly critiques the fascist past and its colonial gaze, as we will argue at length below, the film still contains unexamined vestiges of the colonial gaze. For example, Albanians are presented on the surface level purely as victims of Italian capitalism, depriving them of agency. The film thus participates in aspects of the colonial gaze it attempts to deconstruct. Furthermore, on an ideological and perhaps unconscious level, *Lamerica* is not really about Albania at all. The film's preoccupation with the Italian protagonists' identity crisis makes the Albanians mere background. In analyzing *Lamerica*, we will be making a clear distinction between what Robert Spadoni in his book, *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*, calls<sup>49</sup> explicit meaning, referring to the surface level "moral or point"<sup>50</sup> the film believes it is conveying, and symptomatic meaning, the deeper ideological implications the film "takes for granted, possibly so completely that these values are seldom examined or even acknowledged."<sup>51</sup> In *Lamerica*, we can think of a critique of the colonial gaze as the explicit meaning, while its own complicity in a colonial project is at the symptomatic level.

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<sup>49</sup> Spadoni's categories owe much to the groundbreaking work of film scholars including David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, among others.

<sup>50</sup> Spadoni, Robert. *A Pocket Guide to Analyzing Films*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. Page 20.

<sup>51</sup> Spadoni 22.

### **Organization of Bodies in *Lamerica***

Despite *Lamerica*'s explicit message that Italians' Orientalist gaze towards Albania is a problem, the tension between the film's explicit and symptomatic meanings creates a consistent ambiguity throughout its story. The organization of bodies in the film is one example of this ambiguity. On the one hand, the film continues the tradition of *Skanderbeg*, organizing Albanian bodies in such a way that deprives them of autonomy and agency in order to achieve its ideological goals. Instead of militarizing them, though, which was *Skanderbeg*'s preferred method of body control as a product of a totalitarian empire, *Lamerica* organizes Albanian bodies around Italian television and other symbols of Italian identity and wealth, which represents the empire of global capitalism. This is one example of the ambiguous meaning of *Lamerica*: the film is exposing Italy's Orientalist position of power as a producer of hypnotizing mass media, but on the other hand it removes autonomy from Albanian bodies. The film represents media as a sign of the cultural dominance of Italy over Albania, echoing Negri and Hardt's analysis of the mass media's critical role in neoliberal power relations in their book, *Empire*. They argue that, "communication industries...not only organize production on a new scale and impose a new structure adequate to global space, but also make its justification immanent. Power, as it produces, organizes; as it organizes, it speaks and expresses itself as authority...The communications industries integrate the imaginary and the symbolic within the biopolitical fabric, not merely putting them at the

service of power but actually integrating them into its very functioning.”<sup>52</sup> The media, according to this analysis, integrates new citizens of the neoliberal system into its ideological worldview by showing them idealized visions of life under the system.

The film demonstrates and seems to critique Italian mass media’s dominance over Albanian ambitions very early on. For example, when we first see the shoe company’s Albanian representatives, they are all sitting around a television tuned to Italian pop music videos. They remain silent, and the only thing we deduce about their personalities is that they enjoy Italian television. Televisions appear in the background of several other scenes as well, and always have a few silent, orderly Albanians organized around them. Albanians also group around Gino’s Japanese car, a materialization from a television commercial, either begging for handouts or marveling at the wealth of the vehicle’s occupants. Even the border guards, who were presented as iconic socialist heroes in the Hoxha era, are mesmerized by the sight of the foreign automobile; they stare enviously at it instead of doing their jobs. Throughout the film, Albanians are also shown singing Italian songs instead of Albanian ones, and the plot stops altogether to show a crowd of squatters watching a girl dance to Michael Jackson music in a sexualized manner.<sup>53</sup> In all of these scenes, the film critically exposes how Western mass media preemptively justifies Western intervention in Albania by associating the visual appreciation of status symbols and the consumption of pop music—the most marketable and easily consumable genre—with freedom, wealth, and hope for the future. Crucially, the film criticizes Italian media’s role in promoting Western intervention. The docility with which Albanian bodies are organized around the symbols

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<sup>52</sup> Negri, Antonio and Hardt, Michael. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. PDF. Page 51. [www.angelfire.com/cantina/negri/HAREMI\\_printable.pdf](http://www.angelfire.com/cantina/negri/HAREMI_printable.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> The gender politics and function of this scene will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

of wealth on display contrasts with Gino's ability to move freely through the scene without becoming entranced. These scenes thus act as a visual critique of how the media enforces the power imbalance between Italians and Albanians. In addition, the wealth these bodies are organized around is revealed to be an empty promise by the Italian capitalists themselves. The Italian "investors" who come to Albania are fraudsters who acquire their money by pretending they're going to set up a manufacturing company to provide gainful employment for Albanian laborers, only to pocket the investment grant from the Italian government. The workers employed in the "factory" never see a cent from Fiore and Gino's scheme, further demonstrating that the glamor offered by Italian wealth is only attainable by exploiting the Albanian bodies that are most vulnerable to being organized in this way.

The film doesn't just critique capitalist Orientalism. It also shows Italian media as much more insidiously effective at disciplining Albanian bodies than even Stalinist forms of body discipline, such as the mass violence and propaganda of the Hoxha years. The Italian media succeeds in paralyzing Albanian bodies whereas the overt brutality of the state has failed to completely break them. For example, when Gino and Fiore first arrive in town, they pass a socialist realist mural on the National Museum of Albania, but the youth chasing after their car in search of handouts are far from the idealized, militarized partisans depicted on the mural. In addition, whenever there is a confrontation between the Albanian state and a mass of people, there are always a few individuals shown escaping arrest. This can be seen in the opening scene after the 1940s newsreel, where Albanians try to escape through the border gate as a disorderly mob, as well as in the scene where the military stops the bus on the bridge and tries to shoot fleeing

passengers. The most organized Albanians depicted in these scenes are the children in a rural village who steal Michele's Italian shoes. They are the only Albanians in the scene not rushing towards the food supplies in a mob, apart from the apartment dwellers who poke their heads out to watch them. In this way, the film demonstrates that the totalitarian method of disciplining bodies through policing and militarization has failed, and that Albanians' new body organization is based on control via media, wealth and capitalist status symbols from Italy. In other words, the Stalinists are represented as failing to control Albanians through mass violence, but commercial media and commodities, such as pop music and shoes, are taking the place of propaganda and truncheons. The film is overtly critical of both forms of colonialism.

While *Lamerica's* explicit critique of the power of Italian visual media does show that it is trying to address its own colonial gaze, the critique still depends on techniques that deprive Albanians of agency and individuality, making it rather ambiguous what the critique actually accomplishes. As mentioned before, the Albanians silently take in the images on TV, without expressing any particular feeling about what they are watching. The throngs of people who swarm around the car never receive names or characterization, and give little indication of individual willpower. The Albanians are manipulated by these status symbols as if they are robots, not as people who choose to consume these images of wealth. On a symptomatic level, they are deprived of agency and thus rendered voiceless in the same way as they are in the colonial gaze *Lamerica* is responding to.

### Fluidity of Identity in *Lamerica*

In its explicit meaning, *Lamerica* problematizes the Italian colonial gaze at the nation's former colonial subjects by blurring the lines between Italian and Albanian identities, but symptomatically, the film is engaged in a project of historical revisionism, depicting a split between what I will call the Good Italian from the Bad Italian in order to re-imagine or re-examine Italians' relationship to the fascist past and the colonial gaze. By identifying with the Good Italian personified by Michele, a simple Italian who has been a pawn in history, a victim of both Mussolini and Hoxha, Italian viewers are allowed to rethink their own relationship to the past as well as to the Albanian masses. As the title suggests, the film links the Albanian immigration of the 90s to the mass migration of Italians to America in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. According to an interview with director Gianni Amelio, he "saw in Albania the possibility of making a film about an Italy that no longer existed, and in which the Albanians effectively play the part of ghosts from Italy's *passato prossimo*."<sup>54</sup> In other words, he saw the Albania of 1994 as mirroring turn-of-the-century Italy, and the Albanian immigrants as stand-ins for Italians who left their country seeking a better life. Again, there are two applicable ways to read this quote. On the one hand, Amelio sympathizes with the plight of Albanians because of the historical parallel with Italian migration. On the other hand, he set out to make a film responding to the Albanian migrant crisis without considering the perspective of any Albanian migrants as a primary concern, so one symptomatic meaning of the film is that Albanian perspectives only matter if they are identified with an Italian perspective. Any humanization of Albanians occurs because they are similar

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<sup>54</sup> Duncan, David. "The Sight and Sound of Albanian Migration in Contemporary Italian Cinema." *New Readings*, vol. 8 (2007): page 7. Web.

to the Italian characters, not because Albanians themselves are worthy of humanization. The tension between these two layers of *Lamerica*'s purpose is present throughout the film.

Much of the dramatic tension of the film comes from Michele, the Italian who deserted the fascist army in World War II and ended up in a gulag during Hoxha's rule, not knowing how much time has passed since the war. Throughout the film, his temporal displacement creates a comparison between Italian-American mass migration and the Albanians' quest to get to Italy. The explicit meaning is that Italians and Albanians are the same on some fundamental level. For example, in one scene, the illiterate Michele looks at a mountain with Enver Hoxha's name painted on it, and says, "I bet it says Duce. Mussolini. Are we in Abruzzo?" This scene establishes that Italy's past and Albania's present are so similar that an Italian from the past could mistake Albania for the time and place he comes from. By the end of the film, he is also convinced they are actually going to America and not Italy. By drawing a parallel between Italy of the 1930s and Albania of the 1990s, and expressing his desire to immigrate to America, he identifies his own experience of migratory Italian identity with the Albanians during their own time of mass migration. This is vital to the film's purpose as Amelio describes it in the interview: to respond to the Albanian migrant crisis by making a film that analogizes the Albanian present to the Italian past. On a symptomatic level, however, the conflation of Hoxha and Mussolini presents a very different issue. As we will discuss below, Michele, who has been in an Albanian prison, is depicted as a victim of Mussolini. As the film progresses and Michele becomes the model of a Good

Italian for Gino and the audience to emulate, this has enormous implications for Italy's relation to its fascist past.

Complicating matters further is Michele's forged Albanian papers and stint in the gulag, which had convinced Gino and Fiore that he was the ideal poster child to represent the long-suffering, oppressed Albania to the Italian government. Their perfect Albanian turns out to be Italian, erasing the essentialist demarcation between the two identities required by the Italian colonial gaze. At the same time, it makes the film entirely about Italians with no Albanian input on their own history or identity. Thinking about the film as a critique of the colonial gaze, Michele's character can be read as the ideological antithesis of Skanderbeg. Whereas Skanderbeg is written to exemplify the eternal glory of the static, Albanian socialist identity, to the extent that his positive qualities are literally set in stone at the end of the film, Michele may be read as representing the fragility of identity and its foggy, changeable boundaries. The film's explicit message is that Michele's identity is not based on allegiance to a state, blood ties, or essential characteristics, but on lived experience. In this way, he demonstrates the fragility of the colonizing gaze by reminding the audience of the similarity between the lived experience of Italians of another generation and Albanians in the 1990s. However, on the symptomatic level it becomes clear that he is essentially Sicilian just as Skanderbeg is essentially Albanian. His function in the plot is not to demonstrate the fluidity of national identity as a way of building empathy with the Albanian refugees, but rather, it is to demonstrate a more benevolent alternative to Fiore, who represents capitalism and the fascist past of Italian identity for Gino.

### **Body Doubling in *Lamerica***

Even though *Lamerica* attempts to blur the boundaries of national identity in order to critique the Italian colonial gaze, its symptomatic meaning allows the viewer to read Italians as either positive or negative characters. As discussed briefly above, Michele represents an ideal Good Italian, one who has been victimized by fascism and totalitarianism just as the Albanians have. The lighter-skinned, white-haired Fiore, the mastermind of the procurement fraud scheme, on the other hand, represents the overt racism of the Mussolini era and the discourse surrounding Albanian migrant workers in present-day Italy.

Fiore conveys overt prejudices in every scene he appears in. In his first appearance, Selimi is trying to explain what caused the widespread desperation and hunger in Albania, but Fiore has no interest in hearing the Albanian's account of his own country's recent history of political repression and economic isolation by a paranoid dictator. Instead, Fiore blames Albanians' "addiction" to government services under communism for the economic crisis, and asks, "How the fuck can you die of hunger? You have all this land, oil, water." This response reveals that Fiore is only interested in Albania as a resource to exploit for his own benefit, and the actual lives of the people living there mean nothing to him if they do not maximize their economic utility. He later says to Gino that "The Albanians are like children. If an Italian told them the sea was made of wine, they would drink it." In both of these instances, it is clear that Fiore sees the Albanians through the colonialist stereotypes circulating in Italian discourse at the time: that they are lazy and backwards in relation to Italians, who are therefore obliged to take control of Albania and "civilize" it. His overt expression of the colonial gaze

makes him the Bad Italian, the opposite of Michele's status as a humble, downtrodden Good Italian who has directly experienced the negative consequences of colonial power dynamics.

Both Fiore and Michele act as father figures for Gino in different ways, and Gino's choice of a true father becomes central to the story as it moves forward. In the same scene in which Fiore compares the Albanians to children, Fiore says Gino got his job in the business because his father worked with Fiore on a similar procurement fraud in Nigeria. By trying to induct Gino into his real father's racket, the Bad Italian Fiore becomes a surrogate father for him. However, Michele represents the previous generation of Good Italians, who, like Gino, came to Albania to conquer for his empire, became disillusioned, and became trapped inside the country while the people who sent him off to colonize Albania remained safely in Italy. The central emotional conflict of the film is thus Gino's struggle to decide whether to become a Good Italian or a Bad Italian. This conflict is further reinforced when an Albanian migrant asks Gino, "Who is more important in Italy, the President or the Pope?" That is to say, which is more important, morality or politics? Both figures represent possible fathers of the nation of Italy, but all political authorities depicted or discussed in the film are totalitarian or highly corrupt, while the Catholic Church is presented as a stabilizing force and moral guide, running orphanages and schools during the crisis. This means that between Fiore's fascist model of Italian identity and Michele's humble, nobly suffering model, the film's explicit meaning is that Michele is ultimately the real Italian father figure.

### **Michele as the New Testament of Skanderbeg**

While Skanderbeg is linked to a Mosaic model of authority, as we have discussed earlier, Michele's charity towards children and capacity for suffering make him into a Christ-like figure, because his suffering enables Gino to properly understand his place in history. The pivotal turning point comes when Gino loses his car, the mode of transport that privileges him above Albanians and Michele, in which he initially arrived as a conqueror of Albania. Without the car, he is forced to travel with the crowds and Michele, and learns to empathize with Michele as a result. After being thrown in prison, Gino loses his papers, his last link to the on-paper Italian identity, to a corrupt warden and becomes a blank slate. Michele can fill this blankness with his essential Italian characteristics: being a victim of totalitarianism, being charitable, and rejecting the profit motive. Towards the end of the film, Gino even says, "I don't need the job," after Fiore tells him he's been fired from their scam. This shows his complete acceptance of Michele's worldview as the true Italian way. After being victimized by a totalitarian state, he rejects the opportunity to exploit Albanians for personal gain. Michele thus acts as a father figure in the same way as Skanderbeg does, providing an example of an ideal representative of the nation who comes from a different, purer time and place. The difference is that Skanderbeg's model of authority comes from the Old Testament tradition of Moses, who is seen more as a stern military and political commander who enforces the laws he established, whereas Michele's authority is patterned after Jesus, who is considered in the Christian tradition as a friendlier, more humanistic figure whose authority comes not from his ability to impose his will but the appeal of his mindset. Like this depiction of Jesus, Michele is a gentle, sacrificial figure whose empathy for others

despite his own suffering provides an example to the downtrodden, who will eventually be freed from oppression not through violence but through sheer endurance.

On the explicit level, Michele's imprisonment in the gulag followed by his release and reassertion of identity parallel Jesus's death and resurrection. Like Jesus, he identifies with his oppressors, in this case striking up a conversation with the Albanian soldiers on the bus. He also feeds children and commiserates with the sick and dying. As Michele first learns to move independently of Gino and Fiore after they take him to a convent, he is also associated with Mary, whose image appears as a statue in the convent or as nuns holding infants in imitation of the Mother of God. The nurturing qualities of Mary further contextualize Michele's Jesus-like qualities next to the imperious arrogance of Fiore. On a symptomatic level, however, Gino's conversion to a Good Italian through the Jesus-like Michele in Albania erases the Albanians, as I have mentioned before. Thus, despite the massive differences in genre, explicit political objectives and production style of *Lamerica* and *Skanderbeg*, both engage in a colonial gaze by using Albania as a backdrop in order to construct a new model of national identity based on an idealized character from a different time and place.

The interplay between Michele, Gino and Fiore represents the essential ideological conflict of the entire film; thus the film is, on the symptomatic level, fundamentally about determining whose values best represent Italy: Fiore's materialism and corruption or Michele's humility, charity and simplicity. Albania only exists as a backdrop for the Italian characters to demonstrate these qualities. Thus, while the film intends to deconstruct the colonial gaze of Fiore by showing the devastation it causes in Albania, it actually reinforces a different kind of colonial gaze, in which the Italian gazer

absolves himself of guilt by splitting Italians in Albania into two categories: the fascist colonizer (the Bad Italian) and the charitable saint (the Good Italian). By doubling the Italian characters, the film absolves Gino of his responsibility for helping Fiore colonize Albania by suggesting there is some mythical Italian who is free of the colonial gaze. He has no colonial gaze himself because he is the victim of both fascism and capitalism—like Jesus he is outside of history and absolved of the crimes the fascists committed. This symptomatic meaning avoids the problem of acknowledging that the colonial discourse around Albania was truly pervasive.

### **Heterotopian space and Gino's character progression**

When we read the film on an explicit level, Albania functions as a space of identity flux, in which the Italian characters can examine and resolve the crisis in their national identity. It is a space of transformation, or a heterotopia, which Michel Foucault defines as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, Foucault is arguing that there are spaces that call into question various ideological positions within a culture and allow individuals to examine their relation to the culture as a result. Examples of these spaces may include churches or prisons. One form of heterotopian spaces he cites are crisis heterotopias, which are, “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they

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<sup>55</sup> Foucault, Michel. “Of Other Spaces.” *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*. Trans. Jay Miskowiec. Berlin: October 1984. Originally published in 1967. Page 3-4.

live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, these heterotopias are designed to resolve such crises by remodeling people undergoing crises of instability into new, institutionally approved kinds of people. For example, Foucault cites a military boarding school in which boys undergoing the crisis of puberty are turned into soldiers. In *Lamerica*, the Italian characters are thrown into many heterotopian spaces where their identity is questioned and they must figure out what it means to be Italian. These heterotopias function as spaces of reeducation for the Italian characters. At first glance, this might seem similar to how *Skanderbeg* constructs 15<sup>th</sup> Century Albania as a place of socialist education through crisis. However, the key difference is that *Skanderbeg* is not at all interested in creating heterotopic spaces, as the destruction of ambiguity is key to its objective as a Stalinist epic. Since the function of the film is to maintain hierarchies and define differences between socialist Albania and the rest of the world, it has no room for the concept of heterotopia. On the other hand, *Lamerica*'s explicit meaning is all about ambiguity and fluidity, so the film throws its characters into heterotopic spaces as a result.

Modes of mass transportation also function as heterotopian spaces in the film. In these spaces, Gino's identity as an Italian changes, or is at least reexamined. This is the real message the film wants us to take away: Gino undergoes a change and finds the real Italian identity in Michele. If we are to read the film this way, Gino turns from a capitalist consumer and neocolonialist into a more humane person by learning about his Italian identity from Michele.

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<sup>56</sup> Foucault 5.

Gino's transformation is reflected in the forms of transportation he uses. At the beginning, Gino travels in a car, a private mode of transport that he controls, which is a sign of Italian wealth and the comfort of a stable Italian identity in which he is in control of his own movements. Thus, the car is not a heterotopia. However, Foucault makes clear that a boat, and by extension any form of transport in which large numbers of people are carried from place to place in an enclosed environment, is a heterotopia. He writes, "The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea...it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens...The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates."<sup>57</sup> So much of *Lamerica* takes place in boats, trucks and buses (both of which may be considered "land boats" as their function is identical) because the film's objective is to create a heterotopian space in which Gino can rethink the Italian identity as he imagines it when he enters Italy with Fiore as a Western entrepreneur.<sup>58</sup> Gino's character progression truly begins when he loses his car and is forced into the heterotopian spaces of Albanian mass transport in order to move in the country. In all of these spaces a common pattern emerges: Michele shows empathy for Albanians in their time of hardship as a fellow victim of the Hoxha regime, Gino learns to identify

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault 9.

<sup>58</sup> Gino's character arc is typical of road films, a genre of which *Lamerica* is a member. Road films are a mostly male-oriented subset of the bildungsroman, in which a journey from one location to another, usually by car, becomes a pretext for a series of encounters that transform the central characters. This road film, made in response to Albania's refugee crisis, casts two Italians and no Albanians as the characters whose plot function requires them to be mobile.

more with other Albanians by his example, and the film attempts to draw an important thematic comparison between Albanian and Italian experiences.

As a model Good Italian, Michele has no problem getting onto the bus with the Albanians. He, in contrast to Gino, has a more fluid identity. He is simultaneously Italian and Albanian in his linguistic competency<sup>59</sup> and his life experience. Class and national hierarchies, still meaningful for Gino, do not matter for him in this reading of the film. This heterotopian identity gives him easy access to the bus on its way to the new space where life will not be as messy and ill-constructed. Meanwhile, Gino almost misses the bus because he is busy ranting about the loss of his car, the symbol of his individual agency and superior Western lifestyle. He even tries to get Michele off the bus once it is moving, but other Albanians force him to stay on, and tell him “You no say shithead!” in response to his verbal abuse.

Bodily proximity, dialogue, and contact across ethnic and class lines are the key distinctive features between how Michele and Gino communicate with people on the bus. The contrast between Gino and Michele is clear when Michele tries to initiate a conversation by empathizing with two young soldiers, who still wear the uniforms of the regime that threw him in prison. Meanwhile, Gino refuses to even make eye contact with an Albanian who tries to talk to him about illegally watching Italian TV under communism. This unnamed character also asks the critical question of the film on the explicit level: “Who is more important, the president or the Pope? I think the Pope. Our dictator say, ‘religion is bad for people.’ First he outlaw all religion, but now I go to Italy and become Christian.” While the question about the President and the Pope only

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<sup>59</sup> Although he never speaks Albanian during the film, his acquisition of fake Albanian papers and imprisonment in a gulag indicate that he must have learned the language at some point.

explicitly appears once in the film, it is possible to read it as another expression of the symptomatic meaning of *Lamerica* as a conflict between two competing models of authority. It is only after Gino sees Michele's kindness and the Albanian asks him about the Pope that he begins to make conversation. The beginning of Gino's transformation into a Good Italian begins here. We see the Albanian's question about who is a more important figure in Italy, framed in a way that suggests his desire to go to Italy to become Italian is due to the Pope's positive influence, after we see a humble Sicilian man expressing empathy for people in the uniform of those who victimized him. This attitude can be aligned with the Pope because it imitates Jesus' words on the cross: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." In this heterotopian space, Gino learns that verbal abuse and domination of Albanians no longer works, and that the Pope and Michele represent a more fitting role model.

Eventually the bus stops at a police roadblock, the Albanian passengers try to flee the border guards on foot despite being shot at, and Michele shuts down out of fear of "the Militia," likely referring to the Italian Blackshirts, the Voluntary Militia for National Security, a similar repressive institution from another era. His fear of the physical abuse and domination of both Mussolini's Blackshirts and the communist Albanian Sigurimi further demonstrates the difference between the oppressive brutality of Mussolini, Enver Hoxha and Fiore, and the benevolent equality of the Pope and Michele. In this reading, Michele is a victim of the fascists and thus a Good Italian, making Jesus and the Pope the real models of Italian identity. Michele identifies with Albanians, having suffered alongside them, and he builds a connection with them based on a recognition of their common experiences as poor, suffering people, much like Jesus did and like the papacy

consistently encourages people to do as Catholics. This is in direct contrast to Mussolini and Fiore, who enriched themselves by exploiting others and raised themselves above their victims. They are thus revealed as false Italians in this dichotomy, especially because Fiore mostly disappears from the film after Gino is stranded. However, Michele himself is an object of pity, unstuck in time and initially unable to even speak, so he never quite achieves status for Gino as an equal alternative to Mussolini, Hoxha and Fiore's clear-eyed and unambiguous views of the world, especially because he has been victimized by all three of these people.

Much later in the film, when Gino and Michele are on a truck full of Albanian immigrants, Gino has been molded by his travels with Michele, and he is much more open to conversation with the migrants, even letting them wear his sunglasses. Having removed his sunglasses and being surrounded by people with lighter hair and skin than he has who speak more than he does, Gino has become one of the more "Third World"-looking characters on the truck. However, he still does not speak except in response to direct yes or no questions, and to tell the Albanians they aren't likely to find a job because "There are enough Moroccans, Poles, and black people." When they all sing a song with the lines, "I'm an Italian, a true Italian!" Gino remains silent. Michele, on the other hand, introduces himself to a sick Albanian who is going to a port to board a ship to Italy. However, due to his displacement in time, Michele believes he is going to Naples to find a ship to America.

Here the film establishes a crucial thematic comparison between 1990s Albania and Italy during the time of mass migration, in which 1990s Italy is a destination for a poor people searching for a better life, much like America was for Italian immigrants.

This is why the film is called *Lamerica* even though it's about a journey to Italy. This subtext is made explicit on a truck because for the comparison between Albania and Italy's past to work, Albania must be rendered as a heterotopic space in which identities can be questioned, broken down and reformed.

For Gino, this scene is part of stage two of his character progression. In stage one, which began in the earlier bus scene described above, Gino's fascistic, colonialist Italian identity is called into question as he sees the experiences of Albanians fleeing the direct domination of the type he attempted to create with Fiore. In stage two, his identity has been deconstructed and he is becoming visually more like an Albanian as depicted in Italian discourse at the time: a citizen of the Third World. He has become unshaven and dirty, and is visually grouped very tightly together with the other Albanians, many of whom have lighter hair and skin than he does. Their close proximity "minimizes the number of edits that separate Italian and Albanian bodies."<sup>60</sup> In addition, the tight space of the truck forces him to allow the Albanians to touch him, their touch proving that he is not separated from them as he was in the jeep. However, he still lacks the empathy that Michele's Good Italian identity can provide, as evidenced when the sick Albanian dies and Gino goes off to urinate while Michele stays with the body and tries to help him.

Later, Gino is thrown into a third heterotopian space directly mentioned in Foucault's article: a prison. Here Gino's passport, his official document that guarantees his legal Italian identity, is stripped away by a corrupt government official of the type instrumental to the procurement fraud he once took part in. In a prior scene, Fiore has

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<sup>60</sup> Parvulescu, Constantin. "Inside the Beast's Cage: Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* and the Dilemmas of Post-1989 Leftist Cinema." *Italian Culture* 28.1 (2010): 50-67. Page 58.

already fired him from the scheme, and even though the exploitative colonial corruption of the bad Italian has let him go, he must still face the consequences of the actions he did commit. However, the prison also ends stage two of Gino's character progression, in which his prior Italian identity is finally broken down and he becomes Albanian. When the warden takes away his passport, he says "In Albania, nobody has documents." Gino has now become legally indistinguishable from any Albanian, and his last ounce of Italian privilege is exhausted. This allows him to begin stage three of his character progression: the reassertion of the good Italian identity.

Symbolically, stage three begins immediately after the prison scene, when he is huddled around a campfire with a group of Albanian children learning Italian words. However, the scene immediately dissolves into the final scene of the film, which takes place in another heterotopian space: the ship. The scene brings together the two themes established in other heterotopic spaces earlier in the film: the benevolent Catholic Michele and Jesus as representatives of true Italian masculinity rather than the fascistic colonialist Fiore, and the parallels between the Albanian immigration to Italy and Italian immigration to America. In this scene, Gino wanders lost aboard a ship full of migrants until he encounters Michele, feeding the children like a good Catholic would serve at a homeless shelter. This reestablishes Michele as a Good Italian. Gino then chooses to embrace this model of Italian masculinity by sitting down with Michele. This is the first time in all of these heterotopic scenes that Michele and Gino have sat together. Although Gino still does not speak in this scene, he is letting Michele speak to him freely, and Michele's words summarize the major themes of the film. Michele is convinced they are going to America, and says "Some have brought their families, but

Giovanni [his son] is too young...and Rosa [his wife] is fragile...I'm tired, but I want to be awake when we reach New York." In this heterotopic final scene, Italy has become America, Albania has become Italy and Gino has chosen to embrace the real Italian (meaning Good Italian) masculinity of Michele.

When read on a symptomatic level, though, the film becomes truly insidious. Gino's transformation is due only to his identification with the Italian Michele. Michele is good because he is a victim of fascism just as the Albanians are, therefore, according to this reading, there is no reason for (good) Italians to feel they are responsible for the neocolonial power relations between Italy and Albania. The film does not even seem to be aware of this highly problematic implication, as it undercuts the empathy for Albanians the film attempts to build. The film wants to read Gino's transformation as positive, but the new identity he assumes asks us to see "real" Italians as not colonial, making the entire first scene a depiction of fascists who victimize both Albanians and Good Italians, exonerating the Italian viewer of their colonial gaze. This makes the "false" Italians the real villains of the film as a separate, unambiguously negative foil for Gino, Michele, and by extension, the Italian audience. By making a soldier who invaded Albania and a con artist who tries to take advantage of Albania's economic crisis into victims of totalitarianism, the film engages in historical revisionism regarding who is responsible for victimizing Albania and avoids assigning blame to the Italian viewers for their colonial gaze. As a result, the film undercuts its own explicit meaning that Italians should empathize with Albanians without engaging in a colonial gaze by rewriting history to avoid implicating Italians in the gaze.

### ***Lamerica's* Ambiguity vs. *Skanderbeg's* anti-Ambiguity**

The ambiguity of *Lamerica* towards its own themes is the true power of the film, especially compared to *Skanderbeg's* refusal to allow ambiguity to exist. Whereas *Skanderbeg* describes its vision of Albania by essentializing boundaries, telegraphing every character beat, and establishing a rigid hierarchy between its enlightened, timeless leader and the rest of the population, most characters in *Lamerica* are ambiguous in their motivations and character progression. In other words, every element in *Lamerica* is meant to increase ambiguity of identity, while every element in *Skanderbeg* is meant to eliminate ambiguity. However, it is unaware of its own ideological arguments and rewriting of history to create the difference between good and bad Italians. This makes it in some ways a more sinister film than *Skanderbeg*, because at least *Skanderbeg* is aware on some level that it is engaging in this kind of historical revisionism. *Skanderbeg* explicitly links a 15th Century defender of Christendom to a communist government that resolves this contradiction with an ending that loudly and triumphantly ignores it, but *Lamerica* displays no such awareness. The fact that it's a well-acted, well-directed film that appears to empathize with Albanians makes it more difficult to parse its symptomatic meaning, which makes its colonial gaze potentially more damaging than that of *Skanderbeg*.

While it is true that *Lamerica* is about Gino's progression into a better Italian using Michele as an example of a better Italian, Michele himself is a barely functional human being. Whereas *Skanderbeg* is less of a character and more of a living statue who represents all positive attributes of the ideal leader, Michele is a highly flawed individual who needs Gino to help him adjust socially and reactivate his sense of

agency. Unlike Skanderbeg, Michele never dictates or pronounces clear answers, and his relationship with Gino is much more dialogic than any relationship Skanderbeg has. This is because Michele is a pathetic individual, not a living statue. His authority as a Christ-like figure comes from his victimization by fascism and communism, not from his noble stature. Like Skanderbeg, he exists outside of the regular view of time, because he is still convinced he is living in World War II even at the end of the film. This is presented as positive despite being part of a delusion, because his conflating the fascist past with his own victimization in Albania makes it possible for him to be a Good Italian. His temporal displacement is part of his ideal nature, as it is in *Skanderbeg*. In addition, Michele is played by a nonprofessional actor in his first role, according to the credits, while Gino is played by a “recognizable figure of the Italian cinema.”<sup>61</sup> While this casting choice does identify Michele more strongly with the Albanians, who are also played by “no-names,”<sup>62</sup> it also places Gino in a privileged position over Michele, as the audience would naturally recognize the former but not the latter. Putting Michele in a subservient position to Gino rather than a higher position would seem to subordinate him to Gino, but as his authority as a Christ-like figure comes from his humble dignity in the face of suffering, being played by an unrecognizable actor gives him more authority.

The explicit message of the film is nevertheless somewhat ambiguous. At the end of the film, Michele and Gino are still in a heterotopic space. They never explicitly graduate from their transitional, re-educational space, and it is impossible to know if Gino or Michele ever successfully reclaim their Italian papers, or if the boat even makes it to Italy. The film thus ends without having truly resolved the ongoing crisis of identity it

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<sup>61</sup> Parvulescu 54.

<sup>62</sup> Parvulescu 54.

envisions. While the film indicates that Michele is a better Italian father figure than Fiore, he is still stuck in the past and has no agency in his own life. Even though Gino is transformed as a result of his exposure to Michele within these heterotopic spaces, his transformation is never truly completed and the questions the film poses remain unresolved, however much the film hints towards a certain answer. It is this ambiguity that informs the structure of the film. Whereas *Skanderbeg* sees the formation of Albanian national identity as a fixed, contained point in the past limited to the duration of Skanderbeg's 15<sup>th</sup> Century uprising against the Turks, *Lamerica* sees the construction of national identity as an ongoing, potentially infinite crisis on the explicit level, using Albania's transition from communist structures to capitalist ones as a convenient expression of this struggle. The film's use of Albania as a setting for a story about what it means to be Italian is why, despite its criticism of the Italian colonial gaze of fascism and the anti-immigration rhetoric of the 1990s, it continues to have unresolved issues with its liberal colonial gaze. This is also why it remains ambiguous despite these issues: the film's examination of national identity depends on the questions it raises never being answered, because if it made its own ideological assumptions about Italian national identity overt, it would be a garish, blatantly colonialist film in which Italian liberals cast Albanians as victimized by Italian neoliberalism even though the film itself absolves Italians of guilt and, "benefits from post-1989 political changes...its mode of production replicates neocolonial capitalist practices."<sup>63</sup> Although the film is a coproduction between Italy, France, and Switzerland, it is still a product of Italians using

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<sup>63</sup> Parvulescu 52.

Albanian suffering and labor<sup>64</sup> to make a point about Italy by asserting Italian dominance over the story of these Albanians, but this discourse is submerged beneath several layers of ambiguity and self-awareness.

### **Time and Space in *Lamerica***

Now that we have shown how *Lamerica* uses heterotopian spaces to construct a guilt-free Good Italian identity, it is important to clarify what the film is not doing. Similarly to the film's treatment of space as a series of heterotopias in which it deconstructs national boundaries even while essentializing Michele's fundamental Italian-ness, *Lamerica* treats time as much more fluid and changing than the linear progression of *Skanderbeg*. Like Skanderbeg, Michele is a man who comes from another time and educates someone else in how to be an ideal member of his nation. Both Michele and Skanderbeg both come from other times, and this fact raises their authority as representatives of their films' idealized identities. Skanderbeg's access to another time raises his stature and elevates his authority, as we have previously discussed. By contrast, Michele's access to another time diminishes his agency because he is unable to tell the difference between the past and the present, although he still exercises moral authority as a Christ-like figure due to his capacity for suffering. In *Lamerica*, the present and the past coexist with each other without clear boundaries, as made clear whenever Michele addresses Albanian refugees as if they were Italians fleeing to America. In these scenes, he is extrapolating his present situation using his

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<sup>64</sup> The Albanian labor involved in making the film is revealed in the end credits. The Albanian characters are played by Albanians, there was an Albanian second unit crew, and the credits thank an extensive list of Albanian government ministries and enterprises for their cooperation, from the Ministry of Culture to the port authorities of various cities to renowned filmmaker Dhimitër Anagnosti.

memories of the past, using outdated information simply to keep up with his surroundings. Michele has also transcended history simply by being associated with Jesus. The key difference between the two characters' relationship to their times of origin is that Michele is a victim of the grand motions of history, while Skanderbeg ascends to master these motions. The effect of their presence in their respective films is that Skanderbeg's presence clearly defines the border between physical time and epic time, while Michele's presence as a time-displaced Italian repeating his generation's struggle blurs the boundaries between past and present. This key difference between the two films' approaches to time is a reflection of their ideological goals. *Skanderbeg* exists to firmly establish boundaries, so it establishes an epic time that can only be accessed by political heroes of epic stature. By contrast, *Lamerica* is trying to blur the boundaries between Albania and Italy on the explicit level, so it includes a character from another time who interprets the present using knowledge from the past, who imparts wisdom despite all his actual knowledge being factually inaccurate and outdated. By introducing this universalizing, religiously rather than politically inspired character who is simultaneously authoritative and victimized, the film exonerates the Good Italians by blurring the boundaries between Italy and Albania and therefore the suffering of their peoples under totalitarian governments.

*Lamerica* also blurs the boundaries between past and present by presenting the ruins of the past alongside the present. Throughout the film, as discussed previously, communist slogans appear on the side of crumbling buildings, socialist realist monuments and artworks loom over the characters, and Enver Hoxha's name appears carved into a massive mountain. When Michele gazes up at the mountain and says, "I

bet it says Duce,” he has reminded the audience on the explicit level that he carries the burden of his role as a former conqueror of Albania, which is another layer of historical weight in addition to the communist period and its collapse. These remnants of the communist past almost always dwarf the human bodies appearing in shot with them, making those bodies seem insignificant compared to the massive weight of history. The way *Lamerica* physicalizes the enormity of historical time creates an anti-sublime effect: whereas *Skanderbeg* used the mountains as sublime spaces, to create an epic stage for, “men of elevated dispositions [to] break out of the confines of...the mean and narrow,”<sup>65</sup> *Lamerica* uses mountains to minimize the masses. When the Italians interact with the mountain with Hoxha’s name on it, they experience the impressive but terrifying verticality of the space, but the experience does not lift them up in any way. Rather, Hoxha’s name—and, by extension, Mussolini’s name—visually dwarfs them. Whereas *Skanderbeg* sees time as two dialectically opposed, but parallel streams of physical time and epic time, with the latter only accessible by a select few, *Lamerica*’s explicit meaning sees the past, present and future of Albania and Italy as co-present, with the weight of the past constantly overwhelming the present. While the latter is undoubtedly more nuanced a portrayal of history than the former, neither film gives much agency to the Albanians themselves. In *Skanderbeg*, agency is only truly accessible to those who are can see into epic time, and in *Lamerica*, history itself overwhelms their individual agency. Both views are colonizing because they deprive the vast majority of Albanians of agency.

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<sup>65</sup> Clark, Katerina. *Moscow, The Fourth Rome : Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, And The Evolution Of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. Page 283.

### **Gender and the Road Film in *Lamerica***

As we have discussed above, the explicit message of *Lamerica* constructs Albania as a heterotopian space that enables Gino to reevaluate his identity, which includes his masculinity. Over the course of the film, he moves away from the exploitative colonial masculinity of Fiore towards the compassionate, Christ-like masculinity of Michele. His assumption of the new model of manhood is an arc seen commonly in other road films, a genre that tends to focus on male coming-of-age stories, so it is fruitful to examine how Gino's relationship to female characters changes as a result.

Shari Roberts defines road films in his essay "Western Meets Eastwood: Genre and Gender on the Road" as films in which, "the protagonist, sometimes with a buddy...moves through the film on a physical journey that parallels a spiritual quest...the hero also usually begins a quest, unbeknownst to her/himself, for a better life, a new social order, and fulfillment."<sup>66</sup> As road films are a subset of the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story, in which boys set out on a journey to become men, it is worth considering how Gino maturing into Michele's Christ-like model of masculinity manifests in his relationship to Albanian women. When he is still aligned with Fiore, he enters a nightclub and watches the female singer perform Italian music. As she is singing, an Asian male patron slips money into her bra, whereupon she accepts and thanks him, implying that her body is a commodity to be bought. Gino is also watching her, but through some sort of ornately decorated, perforated divider that simultaneously recalls both a peep show booth and a confessional booth. His face is also lit half in shadow,

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<sup>66</sup> Roberts, Shari. "Western Meets Eastwood: Genre and gender on the road." *The Road Movie Book*. Ed. Cohan, Steve and Ina Rae Hark. London: Routledge, 1997. Print. Page 53.

reflecting that he is split between his desire to consume her in the same way and his guilt. In the same scene, Selimi tells Gino, “Our music is beautiful. Like the singer. Have fun,” with a conspiratorial smile that acknowledges Gino’s arousal. Gino’s face is conflicted, and he never actually pays her or crosses the divider, but he never stops staring at the woman except when speaking to Selimi, which tells the audience that he isn’t watching her for her musical talent. Gino’s male gaze in the scene comes from the exploitative model of capitalist masculinity Fiore embodies. He is not just looking at her as a sex object, but as a sex object to be bought. As a capitalist businessman in Albania, his buying power makes him the most capable of accessing her sexuality, but we never actually see him give her money as the other businessman does. The scene ends on a graphic match cut between a closeup of her face, making eye contact with Gino, and a nun at the head of a classroom, with a crucifix and a statue of Mary at the front of the room with her. The cut is a very literal visualization of the Madonna-whore complex, further demonstrating both the hold of Fiore’s colonial masculinity in Gino’s mind and the seeds of the internal conflict within Gino.

Later in the film, Gino stops to gaze at another female background character, but after traveling with Michele for a very long time, his male gaze has taken on a more “benevolent” model. When Gino wakes up after staying in a hotel occupied by squatters, he sees a crowd of raucous prepubescent boys watching a prepubescent girl dancing to Michael Jackson music in a clearly practiced, lascivious way. One of the older women watching says to him, “If you like the girl, take her to Italy, to be on television.” He looks at the dancer briefly with a horrified look on his face, then chooses to leave. The scene does not advance the plot in any way, but it showcases Gino’s development into a Real

Italian up to this point. Thanks to Michele's influence, the motivation behind his male gaze has shifted from the desire to consume them as objects to a compassion for their plight as women trying to fit into the exploitative model of Western beauty as represented by Italian television. He also looks at her with a sense of complicity, which the mise-en-scene reinforces by framing him in the same shot as the boys who have not reached sexual maturity, but are still learning to see the girl as an object. The most crucial moment in this scene is that he turns away before the scene ends, signifying that he chooses not to look at her, whereas the nightclub scene ends with him still looking at the singer. The dancing girl being a child also allows him to exercise Michele's Christ-like compassion for the children of Albania: as she is a child, she can provide nothing for him sexually in the same way as the nightclub singer. Gino choosing to turn away from indulging in his gaze any further thus acts as a sign that he is becoming a Real Italian man, as he respects women rather than exploits them. At the same time, the film still subjects this Albanian girl to the male gaze to showcase Gino's growth into Michele's model of Italian masculinity, thus engaging in a symptomatic colonial gaze by defining her purely in relation to him, the male Italian viewer.

### **Subtitles and the Silencing of Albanians in *Lamerica***

We have established that even though *Lamerica* is a much more complex and nuanced look at Albania than the mainstream Italian discourse at the time, and it is certainly more complex and nuanced than *Skanderbeg*, it still presents a colonial gaze submerged beneath the layers of nuance and ambiguity that make it a powerful film. However, there is one crucial area where the film engages in the liberal colonizing gaze without any ambiguity: the silence of the Albanian subjects. The Albanian characters are

never subtitled, except for when a crowd is chanting, "Italy, Italy, you are the world!" at the very beginning. Selimi, the only named Albanian character, occasionally speaks to other Albanians in Albanian, but these exchanges are never subtitled. For example, even when Selimi has been caught trying to promote his cousin into a managerial role in the Italians' fake company, and his relationship to the cousin is the most important story element in the scene, their murmurings back and forth remain untranslated. Although the Italians remain understandable, including Fiore, Selimi is rendered incomprehensible and without "official" dialogue because the lack of subtitles has made clear that Selimi's words, and thus his own goals and motivations, are unimportant or even nonexistent. Although he does speak up for himself in slightly broken, accented Italian in response to Fiore's rage, the Albanian dialogue is left incomprehensible, robbing the Italian viewer of insight into his character. His remaining Italian dialogue is reacting to Fiore's rage, meaning the viewer understands his relationships with Italians much more than his relationships with other Albanians. In this way, Selimi is reduced to a passive recipient of the colonizing Italian's whims, rather than an Albanian whose choice to work with the Italians is his own choice. This Albanian is thus never shown in Albania's own terms because his every line of dialogue is colored by his substandard mastery of the colonizer's language.

Without subtitles or an understanding of Albanian, the other Albanian characters are also rendered silent by their lack of subtitles, as well as their miniscule amount of dialogue. This means the Albanians have no "official" language in the film other than broken Italian, and the thoughts not spoken in Italian, meaning all thoughts not specifically meant for the Italian characters to hear, are rendered silent. This is another

signal that the Albanians are only really there as background for the film's real mission of finding the real Italian identity in Michele.

We have previously discussed how Gino progresses from Fiore's stable, but racist Italian identity towards Michele's slightly defective, but benevolent Italian identity, but Michele also "undergoes a process of de-Albanization and re-Italianization"<sup>67</sup> involving language. He starts as Spiro Tozai, a silent and senile old "Albanian" in a gulag, rescued by Italians only to be used as their puppet. However, once he is removed from the labor camp, Gino learns his name is not Spiro Tozai but Michele Talarico, and he begins to speak fluent Italian and begins to exercise agency over his own movement. Michele's de-Albanization is thus marked by learning how to speak again, underscoring how the film conceives Albanians as a people without voice. This is no doubt another sign of the film's sympathy for the plight of the Albanians in the real world, but Amelio could have rectified this voicelessness by giving the Albanian cast members more prominence, more spoken dialogue in Albanian, and subtitles when they do speak. Instead, *Lamerica's* sympathy for the voiceless Albanians is steeped in the Italian colonial gaze that robs them of a voice to begin with, and unlike other instances of the colonial gaze in the film, Gianni Amelio plays the deprivation of subtitles without a trace of self-awareness.

### **Conclusions: The Reassertion of the Albanian Gaze**

*The Great Albanian Warrior Skanderbeg* and *Lamerica*, despite having contrasting objectives, both engage in a colonial gaze because they fulfill their ideological functions by reinterpreting Albanian history in a way that strips Albanians of

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<sup>67</sup> Parvulescu 54

their agency in their own stories. *Skanderbeg* attempts to reimagine an Albanian historical figure as a prototype for the new Sovietized Albanian using an entirely Soviet cast and crew, while *Lamerica* appears to elicit the viewer's sympathy for Albanian migrant workers while simultaneously telling a story about Italians in an Albanian setting where Albanians don't have any role to speak of. The difference between them is that while *Skanderbeg's* overtly colonial intentions and complete lack of subtlety is very obvious to both the audience and the filmmakers, *Lamerica* is more insidious because it is an emotionally effective, explicitly deconstructive film that doesn't know (or show) it is engaging in the same colonial gaze it attempts to deconstruct. The colonial gaze is actually embedded in *Lamerica's* critique of the gaze, as the notion that the "Real Italian" identity is utterly free from fascism and colonialism works to absolve the audience of guilt for having engaged in the gaze as long as they are willing to identify with Michele. In both of these films, foreign production teams used Albania as a setting to fulfill the ideological goals of their countries. Both films ask to be read as coproductions, as we have discussed above, but the notion of the coproduction is problematic at best in *Skanderbeg* and even less applicable to *Lamerica*.

These conclusions raise the question: what would an actual Albanian coproduction look like if conducted on relatively equal terms in which Albania has creative agency? One possible model is the 2015 film *Bota* (Logoreci/Elezi), an Albanian-language film with financing from Albania, Italy, France and Kosovo, which presents an Albanian perspective on the continuing effects of communism on the survivors of political repression. The notion of an "Albanian perspective" is of course problematic, as there is no one essentially Albanian voice, but *Bota* solves this problem

by having two co-creators with different relationships to the country. Iris Elezi is an Albanian-born filmmaker who grew up in the country, while Thomas Logoreci is an Albanian-American whose parents, coincidentally, met at a California screening of *Skanderbeg* in 1954. The cast and crew are Albanian and Albanian is the principal spoken language. While there are Italian businessmen whose construction project is a catalyst for change, their role in the plot is ultimately to alter the interactions between the three principal Albanian characters, not assert their authority as drivers of the plot as they do in *Lamerica*. Rather than try to fit the Soviet-imported socialist realist epic or the Italian neorealist-inspired aesthetic of *Lamerica*, *Bota* incorporates a range of influences from Albanian literature and films made under the Hoxha regime, such as the novels of Ismail Kadare, the films of Dhimitër Anagnosti, and decades-old recordings of Radio Tirana broadcasts of Albanian music. It also stars actress Tinka Kurti, the star of the very first Albanian-produced feature film, *Tana*.<sup>68</sup> All of this positions *Bota* firmly within the literary tradition of Albania, even as it receives money from other countries. Despite one of the writer-directors being an American-accented US citizen whose parents met at a screening of *Skanderbeg*, *Bota* represents a positive step towards the self-definition of Albanian identity even in films funded by more economically powerful countries.

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<sup>68</sup> Logoreci, Thomas. "Live Q&A Session with Thomas Logoreci." *William & Mary Global Film Festival*. Live event. 20 February 2016.

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