

Child Abuse Remains Mundane Even under Symbolic Disguise: Highlights from an Albanian Post WWII Movie

Gentian Vyshka^{1*}

¹*Department of Human Physiology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Medicine in Tirana, Albania.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

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Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/60167>

Opinion Article

Received 02 July 2020
Accepted 08 September 2020
Published 16 September 2020

ABSTRACT

Artistic work during communist regime in Albania has been a strictly controlled area, due to censorship and ideological limitations. However, the creative genius of some individuals was able to transmit religious images in a disguised form, particularly when themes were permissive to ambiguous messages. Depicting child abuse was a taboo for the everyday life, but not when focusing on certain historical periods that were purposefully stigmatized from the state propaganda. Some snapshots and images from the movie 'Red poppies on the wall', shot in 1976, will reveal how the director and the working team operated on Christian symbols to showcase their working philosophy. Thus, sketching the abusive environment of an orphanage within the frames of a remote Roman punishment model, did nothing more, rather than confirmed the main concern that was tormenting authors while trying to delimit the events in time. The abused child is a reality beyond time, ideology and religion, and as such artworks dealing with it have their deserved professional space.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: gvyshka@gmail.com;

Keywords: Atheism; child abuse; religious symbols; movie.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following a mass indoctrination and pursuing an extreme position of communist ideology, Albania outlawed every clerical and religious institution and activity on the year 1967. Churches and mosques were burned down and books reproducing Holy Scriptures were completely banned, with believers of every faith endangering severe charges should their prayers and celebrations would go on in secret or in a disguised form. The same totalitarian position was imposed on art and literature, with images of angels, Holy places, priests or imams removed. When existing, these would serve only within the logic of a history to be re-written and generally all pious, spiritual or religious impulse would be considered as obsolete, hostile to the new order, if not worth mentioning at all.

Shaping an atheistic state went far beyond rationality; in fact, Albanian communism was largely anti-clerical, but this does not mean after all, a complete lack of belief in a divine power. The acting and the philosophy of the regime simulated in some aspects a brand-new religion [1]. Even atheism as a term has a diversity of explanations and forms, whose detailing is out of our scope. Exhaustive and interesting reviews are available and worth reading, since authors accept the inherited, albeit needless, controversy that surrounds atheism [2].

However, artists of high quality and intuition kept on alive their faith, like in fact the majority of the population. Some of the artistic work, although its entirety was produced and published under a strong censorship, could not be deprived from surreptitiously embedded religious images, visions, interpretations and beliefs, even when those were reproduced in highly ambiguous forms, as to evade censorship and the resulting punishment.

Themes of scripts and movies, as all mass media and written literature, were carefully selected. Child abuse was occasionally approached, and while doing so, events and misdeeds were transferred to societies and regimes hostile to the communism. Particular predilection was dedicated into showing the cruelty of fascist Italians that ruled the country from 1939 till 1943; while doing so, an Albanian director and his team carefully and under cover used plenty of Christian messages and schemata, which were officially banned and outlawed.

2. THE PLOT

Events take place in an orphanage during WWII, where ill-treatment and mass beatings are the everyday rule. The fascist boss (school superior) commissions the state of siege; the guardian perpetrates the abuses; and the communist teacher helps enlightening the children's conscience while acting for good. This is a typical schematic movie of the socialist realism, with movie shootings of the Italian superior beating indiscriminately and kicking out the children from the school canteen, and with a two-day collective punishment following, when all the orphans were left without any food at all.

The events take place during the period when Italy occupied Albania and proclaimed the re-installment of Roman Empire. The delusional ideas of Mussolini about the revival of Roman glory are today a theme of jokes even among Italians themselves; however, the huge amount of sufferings and human misery that the period brought all over Europe cannot be underestimated.

The fictional orphanage was a facility that probably existed before Italians occupied the country, and such facilities did really exist. These institutions generally were already scarce in number and quality in Albania during the period preceding WWII, and their quality of service remained slightly above ensuring a mere survival to all unlucky inmates, through all the times and as of today included. Beyond all doubts, orphanages, asylums and hospices are places where the ill-treatment flourishes: this desperate conclusion comes out from plenty of sources [3]. Recently we have as well collected and published our own data, albeit in a slightly different environment, but whose core of intra-institutional abuse was almost indelibly connected to severe and repetitive ill-treatments [4].

The movie named "Red poppies on the wall" was produced in 1976 from the renowned Albanian film director Anagnosti, and it has received particular attention and laurels even internationally [5]. The script was freely adapted from an Albanian novel entitled "The orphans", whose audience was clearly outnumbered from the immense success of the movie. The everyday life of orphans in the facility was filled with menaces from the facility superior, who at

the same time served as Italian teacher to reluctant school inmates (all teenagers). Under the cover of school superior and Italian teacher, this fictional character was at the same time acting as a spy for the questura, the fascist police headquarters that controlled the city and imposed, among other, a strict curfew.

Within the walls of this institution a diversity of abuses was perpetrated, mainly from the guardian, an ill-tempered, drunkard and callous Albanian male of middle age, acting directly under the guidelines of the Italian boss. The guardian repeatedly beats the orphans, orders their exclusion from activities or suspends their entrance in the school canteen, thus reducing some into hunger, when in fact even the normal diet was already reduced to ensure the mere survival.

Below we'll describe some of the major episodes and illustrate those with images / snapshots from the movie; where thinkable, we'll try to approach the entire schema with similar images from historical events that would support our

hypothesis. In fact, although the entire movie was shot under a period of orthodox communism in Albania, when atheism was a state dogma and all references to church or religious values were forbidden, our opinion is that Anagnosti drafted entirely his movie according to a Biblical model: Hell, crucifixion, angels and escape were part of this genius.

2.1 1st Episode: Gates of Hell

Fig. 2 is a photo from the start of the movie, between the 6th and 8th minute after its beginning (the entire movie lasts 1 h 40 minutes). Orphans were forced to wake up in the midnight, when the Italian superior and the guardian of the facility entered brutally in the dormitory and started yelling. All teenagers were forced to run out in the streets of the city, under police control, trying to wipe out revolutionary slogans that communists or antifascists had painted in the city walls. The night was cold and sleepless, and the following morning all teenagers were confusedly returning to the orphanage, as in a grim pilgrimage.



Fig. 1. Poster of the movie “Lulëkuqet mbi mure” (Albanian for ‘Red poppies on the wall’)
[Available also online at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0170178/?ref_=nm_filmg_dr_9. Last accessed August 21st, 2020]



Fig. 2. Orphans turning back to the dormitory after a sleepless night, accompanied from a soldier, and eventually encountering a group of fascist youngsters coming from the opposite direction (white hats, upper center of the snapshot)

[Snapshot from 'Red poppies on the wall']

The Italian superior explicitly suggested to other teachers who expressed their wonder the next day for the poor performance of sleepless pupils, that he was trying to “spiritually mobilize children against communist propaganda”. All this schema might follow the form, or induce the spectator to believe, that the director and the movie team were alluding to the *children’s crusade*, a notorious medieval event that ended up in a human disaster [6].

In an impressive form, albeit transitorily, the director and the photographer have tried to showcase the hellish character of children’s life inside this facility, part of which was the school (a separate building) in a campus composed from the administration, dormitory, the canteen; all together surrounded from high walls. The sign denoting the entrance to the school (Fig. 3) has a deformed “o”, whose size is clearly very much larger from other letters composing the word.

We might speculate even on the selection of font character used for the school sign; anyway, the

big “o” might evoke the infernal entrance, taking always into account that this is an ephemeral detail of the overall movie structure.

The everyday ill-treatment is depicted even in particularly cruel scenes: Children beating one another, under the direct orders of the guardian of the orphanage (Fig. 4).

2.2 2nd Episode: Angels

The issue of Christian symbolism in movies has been scrutinized from several sources [7]. Authors have tried to engage movies theologically, when script-writers and directors were acting in a secular way, as to uncover exactly this hidden symbolism that might be part of the artistic armamentarium of the artists themselves. The global influence of Christianity in the twentieth century led sources to assume that the primary referent of sacrifice histories was the gospel [8].

Some scholars have picked up three main forms of communicating Christian messages through a

movie: cross imagery, cruciform poses and pietà stances [9]. Kreitzer condenses the first two forms of expression as Eucharistic imagery, and gives no credit to pietà stances in his book [10]. Ambivalence toward such stances has surrounded other masterpieces of art [11].

However, in this movie, Anagnosti and his team have carefully avoided all references to pietà

stances while alluding widely to the crucifixion, as we'll show below. A pietà stance would have been totally unacceptable to the heroic imagery of the official ideology: Communists could never bow their head and look for mercy. Instead, once again through playing under the cover of a secular (if not atheist) film director, he opts for depicting the children of the orphanage as angels (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3. The sign denoting the entrance to the school, both in Albanian (upper part) and Italian (below): the “o” is deliberately deformed
[Snapshot from 'Red poppies on the wall']



Fig. 4. Orphans slapping each other in the face, under direct orders of a sadist guardian (center of the image)
[Snapshot from 'Red poppies on the wall']



Fig. 5. Snapshot from the dormitory. The picture of two orphans staring down is just one of the disguised Christian imageries embedded in the narrative
[Snapshot from 'Red poppies on the wall']

The messianic character of the literature teacher simply overemphasizes the religious background: he gives hope, hugs the kids and injects them with Marxist propaganda. It was meant to be exactly the opposite character of the arrogant school superior, and of the cruel guardian that inflicted continuous humiliation to orphans. This *sui generis* trio (teacher – school superior – guardian) is orchestrating the everyday infernal life in the orphanage.

2.3 3rd Episode: The Crucifixion and Pilatus Stance

Following a simple trick from children, the guardian of the orphanage falls from the stairs in the middle of the night and ends up with a broken hand. Mass punishment is ordered from the school superior: two days of starving, collective beating of children, as well as deliberate pressure over one of them, just to force him spying the name of the kid that organized the trick. During a skirmish, the unlucky kid tries to escape from the hands of the aggressive guardian, runs away from the campus, and is shot down in the curfew hours from a fascist patrol. The kid's falling from the wall during the shooting rampage of fascists is depicted clearly as a crucifixion (Fig. 6).

Among all Christian symbols, crucifixion is for sure the most widely interpreted, discussed and

reflected in all beautiful arts. Maybe the cruelty of the act has raised forensic interest even centuries after the application of such an unusual punishment [12]. Brucker has powerfully summarized some of medical and ethical dilemmas, enlightening historical aspects of the issue [13]. The death inside the movie, as elsewhere in the arts, has been shot with a very high emotional value, as the act of murder itself deserves the qualification [14].

The snapshot of the Fig. 6 shows the artistic efforts to re-enact the crucifixion, something that has been tried from other movie-makers as well [9]. Instead, the teenager character in the Albanian movie died from bullets shot from the military patrol, while climbing the wall. In an attempt to cover the story and to exculpate the soldiers, the questor (head of fascist police) in agreement with the school superior, forged the forensic expertise and charged the guardian. According to the official report, the guardian caused the death of the child, while he fell from the wall trying to escape from his assault. The standing position of the school superior, which collaborated closely with the guardian till the day before the orphan's death, resembles the hand washing of Pilatus, in a different artistic form. The episode describes the questor (chief of the police) while charging the orphanage guardian with murder, and with the school superior turning its back during the event (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6. The runaway orphan was caught while climbing the wall of the facility, and shot down from the fascist patrol, in a crucifixion stand
[Snapshot from 'Red poppies on the wall']

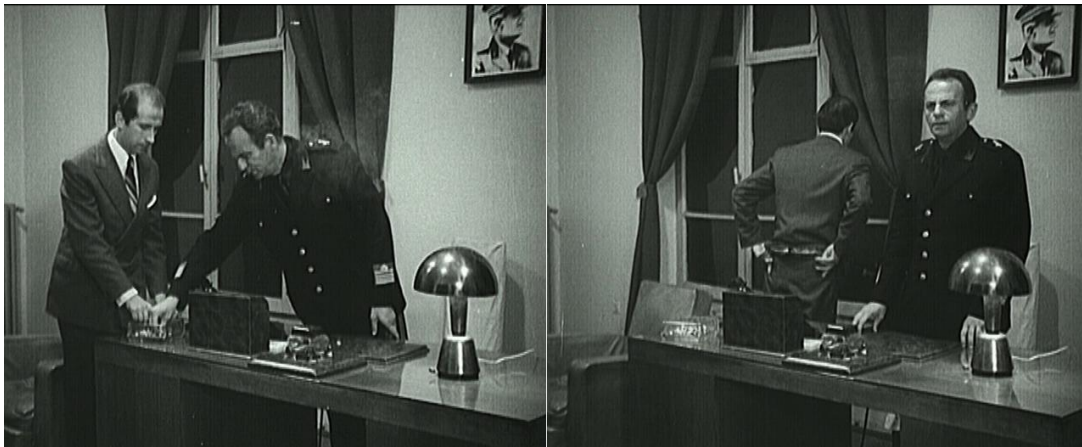


Fig. 7. Left inset: Soon after the killing of the orphan, the school superior (left side in the inset) agrees with the questor (right side in the inset), to blame the guardian for the death that was in fact perpetrated from soldier's patrol. Right inset: The school superior demonstratively puts both hands in the pocket while the questor is charging the guardian for murder
[Both insets taken from 'Red poppies on the wall']

The stance of the taciturn school superior during this moment of truth manipulation will remind the spectator of the rhetorical tyrant of the Roman justice [15]. Complicit to covering the murder of the orphan through a last-minute stratagem that involved a lying coroner, and an anxious questor, the school superior envisages a gloomy future. The messianic character of the literature teacher will become thereafter a clue participant to the

assassination of his previous boss (the school superior), in a dramatization that will close the entire movie.

The crucifixion or cruciform poses is not a novelty even within Albanian post WWII cinema and artwork: some scholars have carefully picked up similar stances in other movies (Giakoumis 2016). Another case of artistic crucifixion has

been suggested to being shot in another Albania movie “*White roads*”, 1974 [16]. Accordingly, the death of the hero is depicted, as quoting Giakoumis: “*perhaps most important of all, our hero, like Christ, appears to die suspended on a tree or telephone pole*” [1].

To showcase the cruelty of the act, as depicted in the cruciform pose (Fig. 6) there is a lack of *pieta stances* hereafter: No mercy, no remorse. One should however underscore the fact that this Judeo-Christian symbolism is not a prerogative of Roman-Latin tradition; very strong similarities are widespread and are found as well within other settings [17].

2.4 4th Episode: The Scream and the Alibi of the Aftermath

With a deep artistic baggage and inspiration, Anagnosti and his team have completed the scene of crucifixion re-enactment accordingly. As in almost all religious icons and representations, above the image of crucified Jesus there are angels, or even ordinary people, staring down at

the time of the punishment. The movie includes even several moments while the other orphans were looking the crime scene from the dormitory windows, as to what was happening to their runaway inmate: They heard the bullet sounds, they saw their companion falling down the wall, and witnessed as well the soldier’s patrol coming close to his corpse (Fig. 8).

A Holy Mass re-enactment is configured inside the convict of the orphanage, soon after the killing of the orphan and the arrest of the guardian. The superior of the institution enters the facility accompanied in a straight line from the questor and other persons. The entrance and the characters’ gait (here in the left inset of the following snapshot) imitates a priest accompanied from deacons and laypersons while entering a church at the beginning of the liturgical service. Even more, the hand signs they make to orphans inviting them to sit down, once reaching a cathedral position as in an improvised altar (right inset of the last figure), re-evokes again the repetitive and disguised religious symbolic, embedded inside the plot.



Fig. 8. The other orphans looking down from the windows soon after hearing gunfire: A previous snapshot of the same scene served as a poster to the film (Fig. 1). With one of the orphans shouting loud (right side of the figure) there is an obvious similarity of the famous picture “The scream” of Edvard Munch
[Snapshot from ‘Red poppies on the wall’]



Fig. 9. After forging the medical expertise, the school superior and his accomplices try to sell their version to the kids: It was an accidental falling, not a shooting. They enter the room as in a procession (left inset) and invite orphans to sit down (right inset) as during the beginning of an eucharistic service. Gait, lighting and gestures all together serve to this strange manipulation of the environment

[Both insets from 'Red poppies on the wall']

3. CONCLUSIONS

While shooting a movie during the time of strict censorship and atheistic society, Anagnosti and his team used and adopted widely, although in a disguised form, some Christian symbolic. This might have been an intuitive choice of a highly talented film director, as well as a deliberate approach to showcase the cruelty of Italian fascism and its straightforward connection with the remote Roman legacy. The media he possessed and worked with, i.e. the movie, might have granted some advantage that lacks to other artistic work, as we've discussed elsewhere [18]. The theme of child abuse was, on the other hand, a taboo that had to be broken only if transposed in another time, and in another regime: the occupied Albania from the fascists during WWII was an excellent choice.

Recently there has been a consistent bulk of scholars focusing on Albanian post WWII movie and cinematography, with some of them focusing on the value of snapshots and isolated images [19]. This might be helpful not only under the hermeneutic perspective, since this interest will boost attempts to safeguard this precious heritage, while some political deviated influences are trying to efface everything related to communism and to the second half of twentieth century, Albanian artworks included [20].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Images / snapshots are courtesy of the Albanian National Film Archive. The author extends

grateful thanks to Eriona Vyshka, Albanian National Film Archive, for her precious help during the selection of the figures / snapshots. Tedi Mana, clinical psychologist in Tirana, has also critically revised the initial draft of the manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/60167>