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**A CINEMA EMERGES IN NEWBORN KOSOVO**

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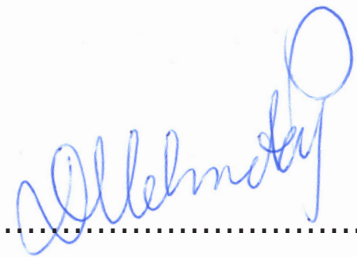
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## **ABSTRACT**

Twenty years after the war in Kosovo and ten years after the declaration of independence, the cinematography of Kosovo shows glimpses of becoming a movement. Struggling between the old generation of filmmakers driven by war stories and the young generation of filmmakers driven by the social context in post-war society, films produced in Kosovo finally broke their way to international festivals and gained international recognition.

This thesis focuses on some of the most successful and critically acclaimed films made in Kosovo since the declaration of independence in 2008 and tries to analyze them to identify similarities and patterns that connect these films with each other. How are they made, how are they founded, what stories do they tell, the source of inspiration, the background of the authors, and the motivation behind their work, in order to come to a conclusion on what are the defining patterns of this movement.

Among the awards received by these films are some of the main prizes in important festivals such as Sundance, Rotterdam Film Festival, Karlovy Vary Film Festival, and nominations in festivals such as Berlinale, Toronto Film Festival, Oscar Nominations, etc.

## **ABSTRAKT**

Dvacet let po válce v Kosovu a deset let po vyhlášení nezávislosti konečně kinematografie Kosova ukazuje záblesky toho, jak se stát hnutím. Filmy produkované v Kosovu, které bojují mezi starou generací filmařů poháněnou válečnými příběhy a mladou generací filmařů poháněnou sociálním kontextem v poválečné společnosti, si konečně razí cestu na mezinárodní festivaly a získávají mezinárodní uznání.

Tato práce se zaměřuje na jedny z neúspěšnějších a nejkritizovanějších filmů, které byly natočeny v Kosovu od vyhlášení nezávislosti v roce 2008, a snaží se je analyzovat s cílem identifikovat podobnosti a vzory, které tyto filmy navzájem spojují. Jak jsou tvořeny, jak jsou zakládány, jaké příběhy vyprávějí, zdroj inspirace, zázemí autorů a motivace jejich práce, aby dospěly ke kontextu o tom, jaké jsou určující vzorce tohoto hnutí.

Mezi cenami udělovanými těmito filmy jsou některé z hlavních cen na významných festivalech, jako je Sundance, Rotterdam Film Festival, Filmový festival Karlovy Vary a nominace na festivalech jako je Berlinale, Toronto Film Festival, Nominace na Oscara atd.

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## Introduction

The year 2021 marked the peak of success for the cinematography of Kosovo. Four feature films produced by young female directors, all of them with their debuting films, conquered the cinemas of film festivals worldwide, winning the hearts of the viewers everywhere they went. These films received many trophies, including the main awards at the world's most prestigious film festivals such as Cannes, Sundance, Rotterdam, and Tokyo festival. Their journey of success is still ongoing.

*Hive*, a feature film by Blerta Basholli, won three main awards at Sundance for the first time in the festival's history,<sup>1</sup> and an award at the Warsaw Festival. *Looking for Venera*, a feature film by Norika Sefa was awarded at the Rotterdam and Sarajevo film festivals. *Vera Dreams of the Sea*, a feature film by Kaltrina Krasniqi, received the Tokyo Grand Prix award and got a nomination at Venice Film Festival. *The Hill where Lionesses Roar*, a feature film by then-19-year-old Luana Bajrami, got two nominations at Cannes Film Festival and an award at Warsaw Festival. Except for these four feature films, *Displaced*, a short documentary by Samir Karahoda, was also awarded at category A festivals.<sup>2</sup> It won awards at Sundance and To-

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1 Macabasco, Lisa Wong. "A Breakout at Sundance, Blerta Basholli's 'Hive' Tells the Moving Story of a Mother's Persistence." *Vogue Magazine*, 5 Nov. 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/article/blerta-basholli-hive-interview>.

2 Konushevci, Arton. *Interview with Zharku: This Is the Best Year for the Cin-*

ronto Film Festival. It got also nominated for Palme d'Or - Best Short Film at Cannes.

These films were all released in 2021 alone, and they constitute only the tip of the iceberg of a new film wave happening in Kosovo and redefining its cinematography. A film wave started a few years after the war of 1999 but accelerated its pace around 2008 when the Kosovo Cinematography Center began to function. KCC boosted the development of cinematography as it provided steady year-to-year funds for subsidizing all kinds of film projects, and created consistency.

KCC is the state cinematography fund, open to the public, subsidizing short and feature films, documentaries, animations, script developments, post-production, and International and minority co-productions. KCC has supported around 240 projects since its foundation.<sup>3</sup>

KCC started operating with a relatively small budget, which kept growing yearly, increasing the numbers of projects subsidized. While in 2008, the overall budget of KCC was 300,000 EUR<sup>4</sup>, which was used to subsidize four different projects: two feature films, a documentary, and a short film. In 2021, KCC supported 22 projects with 1.3 Million EUR<sup>5</sup>, including five fea-

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*ematography of Kosovo. Radio Free Europe*, 17 July 2021, [www.evropaelire.org/a/arben-zharku-kinematografia-suksese-nderkombetare-/31363603.html](http://www.evropaelire.org/a/arben-zharku-kinematografia-suksese-nderkombetare-/31363603.html).

3 Calculated from yearly reports on the official site of KCC: [www.qkk-rks.com](http://www.qkk-rks.com)

4 *Projektet e vitit 2008 [The Projects of 2008]*. KCC, 6 Mar. 2008, [qkk-rks.com/uploads/files/2018/March/06/Projektet\\_e\\_subvencionu-ara\\_20081520346622.pdf](http://qkk-rks.com/uploads/files/2018/March/06/Projektet_e_subvencionu-ara_20081520346622.pdf).

5 *Projektet fituese të konkursit të projekteve filmike 2021 [The Winning Film Projects of the 2021 Competition]*. KCC, 31 Dec. 2021, [qkk-rks.com/uploads/files/2022/February/02/Konkursi\\_2021\\_Projektet\\_fituese\\_dhe\\_shuma\\_e\\_subvencionit1643835257.pdf](http://qkk-rks.com/uploads/files/2022/February/02/Konkursi_2021_Projektet_fituese_dhe_shuma_e_subvencionit1643835257.pdf).



ture films and two debutant feature films. The budget allocated to KCC for 2022 is 1.5 Million EUR.

However, it took a couple of years until these films started showing the first signs of success. The short film *Columns* by Ujkan Hysaj, subsidized on 2010's annual call and finished in 2012, received the Audience Award at Warsaw International Film Festival in 2012 and Best Live Action Short Film at Cleveland International Film Festival in 2013. The first feature film to receive awards in a category A film festival was *Father* 2015 by Visar Morina. It won the *Best Director* and *Label Europa Cinemas* awards at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the first film to break the ice for the new cinema of Kosovo is considered to be *The Return* 2009 by Blerta Zeqiri, which KCC did not subsidize. It was one of the short films financed by Nine Eleven Dedication Film Festival, and it was made with a minimal budget.<sup>7</sup> *The Return* won the Short Film Jury Prize at Sundance festival, And "It gave hope to the whole industry," as Blerta Basholli, the director of the feature film *Hive*, which later made history in Sundance, claims during the interview I conducted with her.<sup>8</sup>

Since then, tens of Kosovo films have premiered and been awarded in film festivals worldwide, culminating in 2021 with the success of five films as mentioned earlier.

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6 *Závrená Tisková ZPRÁVA [Final Press Release]*. Karlovy Vary Int. Film Festival1, 1 July 2015, [kviff.com/img/history/2021/zaverecna-tiskova-zprava-55-rocnik.pdf](http://kviff.com/img/history/2021/zaverecna-tiskova-zprava-55-rocnik.pdf).

7 Zeqiri, Blerta. Personal Interview. 29 Aug. 2022.

8 Basholli, Blerta. Personal Interview. 29 Jul. 2022.

The new cinema of Kosovo is still a new and ongoing topic, and very little literature exists about it. Of the scholarly work published about Balkan cinema, there is usually only a brief chapter about Kosovo cinema that I want to focus on in my thesis. The information about the films could be gathered exclusively from newspapers and journal reviews, which indeed is not sufficient material. Therefore, to build credible arguments, I interviewed some of the authors of these films. We talked about their movies and the cinema of Kosovo in general, and the findings from those interviews significantly enriched my research. I also interviewed the ex-director of KCC, Mr. Arben Zharku, who led the institution through its main achievements, and the current acting director of KCC, Mr. Lum Çitaku. He, from his position, may significantly influence Kosovo cinema, as he is leading the commission that is drafting the new law of cinematography.

Since there is no established film industry with a proper cinema network in the country, international recognition and success in international film festivals are the motivation and the main goal of the films produced in Kosovo, especially the ones subsidized by KCC. In this thesis, I will try to focus only on the movies that marked the most critical milestones on the road to recognition and contributed to making the new cinema of Kosovo a distinguished movement, with the goal of identifying the patterns connecting these films with each other, and defining the characteristics of this movement.

The thesis begins by providing a historical context of the cinema of Koso-

vo, in the first chapter and moves on by exploring the social circumstances and different factors that led to the rise of the new cinema in the second chapter. The third chapter analyzes the movies that marked the crucial milestones of the new movement in order to come to point out its defining elements in the fourth and fifth chapter.

This thesis argues that what we are seeing in the post-war cinema of Kosovo today is a new movement mainly led by female directors, who, through their debut films, challenge society's traditional patriarchal order.

## I. Cinema in pre-war Kosovo

To better understand Kosovo's cinematography, its development, importance, and uniqueness, it is crucial to know the country's historical context in relation to the time frame when filmmakers produced these films and the parallel cultural evolution that happened.

Kosovo started making films in the late 60s. The first films shot in Kosovo were produced by Kosovafilm, founded in 1969 by a decree by the Assembly of Kosovo as a state institution for producing, distributing, and screening films<sup>9</sup>.

At that time, Kosovo, where the vast majority of the population (above 90%) were ethnic Albanians, had the status of Autonomous Province within communist Yugoslavia and officially had nearly equal powers to Yugoslavia's six republics. The Albanian language was the co-official language in Kosovo, together with Serbian.<sup>10</sup>

The first eight films, produced between 1970 and 1976, were shot by Serbian directors, though, and were in the Serbian language. Most of them were collaborations with Serbian production companies Avala Films and Filmske Novosti.<sup>11</sup>

Kaltrina Krasniqi argues during her interview that these were not Kosovar films but films shot in Kosovo instead, "with tendencies to portray Albanians as exotic

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9 *The history of Kosovafilm*. Kosovo Ministry of Culture, Web Accessed, 10.03.2021, <https://www.mkrs-ks.org/?page=1,125>

10 Malcolm, Noel. "Kosovo: A short history". *Kosovo under Tito: 1945-1980*, 1st Edition, New York, NYU Press; 1998. Print. pp. 327-347.

11 Elsie, Robert. *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2011, pp. 244-245.

people, within Yugoslavia," and Serbian directors directed them.<sup>12</sup>

Kosovafilm's first film shot in Albanian language, by an Albanian director is *Kur Pranvera vonohet* (When spring comes late) by Ekrem Kryeziu in 1979, a war-themed movie, based on the diary of Fadil Hoxha during the partisan revolution in Kosovo in the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

In the same year, Kosovafilm produced another feature film, *Era dhe Lisi* (Wind and Oak), written by Petrit Imami and directed by Besim Sahatçiu, which granted Kosovafilm its first awards as it received two prizes at Pula Film Festival, the most prestigious in Yugoslavia.<sup>14</sup> It also got awarded at Sarajevo Film Festival in 1979.

Ekrem Kryeziu directed another film in the following year, *Gjurmë të Bardha* (White traces) 1980, which granted him an award for best directing at Pula Festival. The total number of films shot by Kosovafilm before the war is nearly twenty features and ten documentaries.<sup>15</sup>

Except for the internal success within Yugoslavia of films produced by Kosovafilm, the film *Proka*, 1985, by Isa Qosja, also received international recognition. Isa Qosja won the *New Hope Award* in 1986 in Cannes.<sup>16</sup> Named after the main character, the movie *Proka*, written by Eqrem Basha, is a drama about the injustice that Proka faces due to the provincial mentality. It is one of the most successful

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12 Krasniqi, Kaltrina. Personal Interview. 19 July 2022.

13 *When Spring Comes Late*. MUBI, <https://mubi.com/films/when-spring-comes-late>. Web Accessed, 29.08.2022

14 Neziraj, Jeton. *Faruk Begolli Monography*. Integra, 2018.

15 *Kosovafilm Movie List*. WebArchive/Kosovafilmi.com, 2005, [web.archive.org/web/20050317140038/www.kosovafilmi.com/sq/fi/](http://web.archive.org/web/20050317140038/www.kosovafilmi.com/sq/fi/).

16 *The history of Kosovafilm*. Kosovo Ministry of Culture, <https://www.mkrs-ks.org/?page=1,125>. Web Accessed, 10.03.2021.

films produced by KosovaFilm.<sup>17</sup>

These films mark the beginning of Kosovo's cinema, which proved to be very promising but kept developing only until the early 90s when Slobodan Milošević came into power as the new leader of Yugoslavia. Within weeks of gaining power in 1989, Milosevic stripped Kosovo from its autonomy and placed it under the direct control of the Serbian government. The Albanian language was prohibited, schools in the Albanian language were closed, and ethnic Albanians got kicked out of public institutions.<sup>18</sup> As Pula puts it in his scholarly publication:<sup>19</sup>

“With the introduction of special legal authorizations that permitted the regime to massively lay off Albanian employees from jobs (the majority of which were in state-owned institutions and enterprises), threaten the education system in the Albanian language by forcing Albanian teachers to adopt Belgrade-approved curricula, shut down Albanian-language media, including the only Albanian-language daily, and violently suppress any open manifestation of discontent.” (Pula)

The same fate followed Kosovafilm as well. Serbian authorities took it over and dissolved it. Consequently, this created a decade-long gap in Kosovo's cinema be-

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17 Sele, Bekim. *KOSOVAFILMI (me fokus, filmat e Isa Qosjes)*, University International Conference, 2021, <https://knowledgecenter.ubt-uni.net/conference/2021UBTIC/all-events/119>

18 Krieger, Heike, editor. *Kosovo's Status in Yugoslavia before 1999. The Kosovo Conflict and International Law: An Analytical Documentation 1974–1999*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 1–13.

19 Pula, Besnik. *The Emergence of the Kosovo Parallel State. In Conflict in Southeastern Europe at the end of the Twentieth Century*. Routledge, 2006, pp. 806

cause filmmakers could not institutionally shoot films.

The new situation marked the beginning of a parallel institutional life for ethnic Albanians living in Kosovo. A parallel "shadow" government got formed, organizing parallel medical institutions, education, media, arts, sport, and economic survival, which lasted for a whole decade.<sup>20</sup>

In her master dissertation, *The Nation in VHS*, filmmaker Kaltrina Krasniqi rightfully argues that the same thing happened with the film industry. Some of these directors who had films produced by Kosovafilm, including Ekrem Kryeziu and Agim Sopi, managed to keep creating during the parallel life as well. Being unable to shoot in celluloid, they kept making movies in VHS tapes instead, which were primarily consumed by the large Albanian diaspora, resulting in a film movement of its own, as Kaltrina explores it in her thesis:<sup>21</sup>

"In the year 1992, the Kosovo VHS entertainment industry was born and became quickly profitable. At the time, the only goods Kosovars were massively producing and exporting were their people, who grew into a large Diaspora in Western Europe and the United States, and video cassettes of New Year's Eve programs and feature films produced for these very same immigrants. Packaged and manufactured as entertainment, the most fascinating aspect of these products is their constant production of images and narratives of the Albanian nation." (Krasniqi, 2011, pp.2-3)

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20 Clark, Howard. *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*. Pluto Press, 2000

21 Krasniqi, Kaltrina. *The Nation in VHS - Independent Entertainment Production in Kosovo 1990 -1999*. Kosovo Institute of Journalism and Communication, Master dissertation, Prishtina, 2011.

The VHS industry consisted of feature films and New Year Programs with songs and comic plays. VHS tapes were also used as a means of communication between Albanians living in Kosovo and the ones living in the diaspora. Kaltrina managed to gather around thirty films and fourteen New Year's Eve Programs, out of which she chose nine feature films for her thesis focus.

Zharku also argues that the videotape period was a kind of revolution in itself, as it was a resistance not to deny the culture and community and a parallel way to create and watch movies.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Zharku, Arben. Personal Interview. 21 Jul. 2022.



## II. Post-war Kosovo and the cultural change

The oppression of Albanians in Kosovo by the Serbian regime in the late nineties resulted in a large-scale conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army and Serbian forces. It ended only after 79 days of bombing campaign led by the NATO alliance, which intervened to stop the ethnical cleansing of the Albanian population by the Serbian authorities.<sup>23</sup>

After the end of the war of 1999, Kosovo finally became a free country. Serbian forces got retracted from Kosovo, paving the way for NATO's peacekeeping mission forces called KFOR (Kosovo Forces), which grants Kosovo's security until nowadays. A temporary government led by United Nations was installed, and governed Kosovo for the following years.<sup>24</sup> During UNMIK (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo) administration, new institutions were established, and Kosovafilm got revived. It functioned under the Department of Culture within the UNMIK Government.

After the revival, Kosovafilm managed to produce only a few documentaries and only one more feature film, *Kukumi*, 2005 by Isa Qosja, one of the most successful directors from the pre-war era.

Beautifully shot by the director of photography Menduh Nushi, the movie fol-

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23 *NATO's Role in Relation to the Conflict in Kosovo*. NATO. July 15, 1999. <http://www.nato.int/Kosovo/history.htm>.

24 Hysa, Ylber, et al. *UNMIK AND KFOR IN KOSOVA. THE SOUTHERN BALKANS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE REGION*. Edited by Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2001, pp. 47–60.

lows three mentally ill individuals: Kukumi, Mara, and Hasan. After the war ended in 1999, the mental institution where they lived got abandoned by the military and the nursing staff. They wander free around Kosovo but feel unwelcome everywhere they go, especially by their families. *Kukumi* is a brilliant black comedy portraying freedom in post-war Kosovo.

*Kukumi*, produced by Gani Mehmetaj, was a coproduction between Kosovafilm and Jadran Film from Zagreb, Croatia, and was shot in celluloid. The lack of expertise to shoot in film stock, created as a result of the decade-long gap in filmmaking was covered by the Croatian crew who were engaged in the camera department and in sound production and post-production<sup>25</sup>. *Kukumi* is the only film shot in celluloid in Kosovo after the war.

The film got awarded at the Venice, Sarajevo and Sofia Film Festival.<sup>26</sup> *Kukumi* is Isa Qosja's first film in seventeen years and the first produced in Kosovo since the conflict ended in 1999. However, it is the only feature film that Kosovafilm managed to produce after its revival when the war ended. The lack of cinematography law and finances made it difficult for the filmmakers of Kosovo to shoot movies and continue developing their cinema.<sup>27</sup>

The administration of Kosovo by the United Nations lasted for nine years until 17th February 2008 when Kosovo finally declared its independence from Serbia and became the newest country in Europe<sup>28</sup>.

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25 *Kukumi*. IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0472839/>. Web Accessed, 08.03.2021.

26 *Kukumi*. Isa Qosja Official Website, <http://www.isaqosja.com>. Web Accessed, 08.03.2021.

27 Mehmetaj, Gani. *Magic of the screen*. Prishtinë: Kosovafilm, 2005. Print.

28 *KOSOVO DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE*. International Legal Materials,



**1.1.** Newborn monument filled with signatures. Karrota, 2008

One of the main events that marked independence day was the revelation of the monument made of big letters stating "NEWBORN," created by Fisnik Ismajli, which symbolically refers to the newly formed state. The design got chosen for several reasons. It is a simple, quickly understood, and easily translated word with various meanings. It represents the national pride that the people of Kosovo felt for earning their freedom and establishing themselves as the world's newest state. The statue was signed by the leaders of KOSOVO, its citizens and international visitors. The slogans that media outlets in Kosovo ran following the unveiling represent the plurality of meanings citizens found in the monument. These included: "NEW life is BORN," "NEW hope is BORN," "NEW future is BORN," and "NEW country is BORN."<sup>29</sup>

The monument went viral worldwide quickly and became a tourist attraction; therefore international community and western media were referring to Kosovo as

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vol. 47, no. 4, 2008, pp. 467–68.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Fisnik Ismajli: *NEWBORN, the symbol of Kosovo Independence*. New Kosova Report, 4 July 2008, [https://www.advocacynet.org/kosova\\_a\\_newborn\\_state](https://www.advocacynet.org/kosova_a_newborn_state). Web Accessed, 01.04.2021

“Newborn Kosovo”.

With the declaration of independence came the need to promote and position the “newborn” country on the world scene, politically, economically, culturally, and in sports. The need to tell the world who we are, what we went through, and what we have to offer. Moreover, at the same time, preserve the truth about the past. This need is present in almost all cultural creations, especially cinema and sports.<sup>30</sup>

### **A. The foundation of the Cinematography Center**

In the same year, when independence was declared, based on the new cinematography law, Kosovo Cinematography Center was founded and changed the situation for the future of the film in Kosovo. While Kosovafilm preserved its statute and became the film archive body, Kosovo Cinematography Center became the state cinematography fund, open to the public, which subsidizes short and feature films, documentaries, animations, script development, post-production, and International and minority co-productions. Kosovo Cinematography Center has the attributes of the central authority for cinematography in Kosovo.<sup>31</sup>

The new situation that got created paved the way for reviving the cinema of Kosovo but under entirely new circumstances. Film funds were accessible to every-

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30 Parameswaran, Gayatri & Gaedtke, Felix. *Art of change in post-war Kosovo*. *Al Jazeera*, 29 Oct 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/10/29/art-of-change-in-post-war-kosovo>

31 *The Profile of Kosovo Cinematography Center*. Kosovo Ministry of Culture, <https://www.mkrs-ks.org/?page=1,137>. Web Accessed, 18.03.2021

body; therefore, new talents with a fresh approach came to the surface. According to the new cinematography law, a board of directors of Kosovo Cinematography Center gets named by the minister of culture. The board of directors, each year, independently chooses a special jury who is responsible for artistically evaluating submitted projects during the yearly open call. The chosen projects are afterward financially evaluated by a Financial Comity.<sup>32</sup> Zharku, the ex-director of KCC (2014 - 2021) says:

“We have tried to make the best of it by creating some regulations based on the best values deriving from the law. We created an international jury, which evaluated the projects of Kosovo without any points of influence or interference. I think this led to the appreciation of young talents who were unknown before.”  
(Zharku)

This approach enabled fair competition among filmmakers and opened new possibilities for young artists, who thought that they’ll never be able to shoot any feature films in their lives, as Blerta Basholli, the director of *Hive*, shares in her interview:

“When Kaltrina and I were students, I never thought that I would ever be able to make a feature film in my life because older directors always took the funds. There was a tiny budget for the

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<sup>32</sup> LAW NO.2004/22 ON CINEMATOGRAPHY. Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosova, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2474>. Web Accessed, 18.03.2021.

cinematographic center; one director would receive it this year, the other the following year, and so on. I thought a little girl who finished school would never manage to receive any funds. Fortunately, things changed with a change in management, and funds began to be allocated fairly, in my opinion". (Basholli)

While before the war, most of the filmmakers got educated in Belgrade or other Yugoslavian schools, after the war, the filmmakers came from a more mixed background. Except for the film department reopened in the Faculty of Arts in Prishtina, there were film-making workshops, classes, and courses financed by international organizations. Young filmmakers had more possibilities to study abroad and participate in international film sets. With the help of the internet and cheap film-making equipment available today, many young people got self-educated. This development helped complete film crews with professionals and brought variety in artistic approaches.

In 2013, the Ministry of Culture of Kosovo, through Kosovo Cinematography Center, signed a memorandum of understanding with FAMU International of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, committing to provide each year a full scholarship from the state for a student from Kosovo who gets accepted to master programs in FAMU International.<sup>33</sup>

This is another step toward diversifying the educational background of Kosovo

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33 *Nënshkruhet marrëveshja FAMU-QKK-MKRS [The deal between FAMU-KCC-MKRS is signed]*. Kosovo Cinematography Center, <https://qkk-rks.com/sq-al/info-lajme/128/nenshkruhet-marreveshja-famu-qkk-mkrs/>. Web Accessed, 10.03.2021.

filmmakers and bringing a new approach to the country's cinematography and already started to show success. One of the most successful movies treated in this thesis, *Looking for Venera*, 2021, was directed by Norika Sefa, who studied at FAMU, while Enis Saraçi, also a FAMU student from the editing department, edited three of the most successful films from this period. He edited *Hive*, 2021, by Blerta Basholli, *In-Between*, 2019, and *Displaced*, 2021, by Samir Karahoda.

According to the current acting director, Lum Çitaku<sup>34</sup>, since its foundation, the Cinematography Center gave utmost importance to international agreements, which later influenced the development of cinema positively. Agreements with film organizations, festivals, film markets, educational centers, script labs and co-production agreements with other states like Albania, Macedonia, France, and Israel.<sup>35</sup>

With every agreement signed, KCC made another step toward advancing cinematography. Agreements with festivals ensured more attention by festival programmers, various courses empowered professional advancement, and the co-production agreements helped the companies to complete funds for their projects and find co-producers. At the same time, it allowed them to work with professionals from other countries and exchange knowledge.

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34 Çitaku, Lum. Personal Interview. 28 Jul. 2022.

35 Kosovo is a part of EFA (European Film Academy) and has partnership agreements with EAVE (European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs), EFP (European Film Promotion), etc.

## B. Film Festivals

Kosovo remains as the only country in the Europe which needs a travel visa to visit to the rest of the continent, resulting in a unfair insolation for it's youth. In a country where there are few cinemas and they all screen block-buster movies only, film festival played a crucial role to cultivate the taste for cinema. They served as the only window to arthouse films for cinema lovers, especially for the fact that arthouse films are hard to obtain even online. Some of the festivals even have filmmaking workshops and seminars and they organize masterclasses with national and international actors, directors, cinematographers and all kind of film artist.

One of the first film festivals to get established right after the war was Dokufest. **Dokufest** is an international documentary and short film festival based in the city of Prizren, also known as Kosovo's capital of culture. It started in 2002 as a tiny festival organized by a group of friends and film fans and has grown to become one of the region's most prominent cultural events. From 2019, it became a BAFTA qualifying festival for short films.<sup>36</sup> US magazine MovieMaker has listed DokuFest as one of 25 coolest film festivals in the world.<sup>37</sup>

DokuFest is remarkable for its contribution to the mood and energy of Prizren, bringing international tourists and engaging over 150 volunteers who help during the event. Workshops, DokuPhoto exhibitions, DokuKids festival for children, festival camping, and DokuNights music concerts are among the activities accompa-

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36 *BAFTA Qualifying Festivals List*. BAFTA, [https://awards.bafta.org/sites/default/files/images/short\\_film\\_qualifying\\_festivals\\_list\\_-\\_27.09.pdf](https://awards.bafta.org/sites/default/files/images/short_film_qualifying_festivals_list_-_27.09.pdf). Web Accessed, 08.08.2022.

37 *The 25 Coolest Film Festivals in the World 2020, Presented by FilmFreeway*. MovieMaker, 10 Aug. 2020, <https://www.moviemaker.com/the-25-coolest-film-festivals-in-the-world-2020-presented-by-film-freeway>.



nying the festival. The tenth-anniversary edition of DokuFest was the largest yet. Two hundred thirty films from 55 countries got screened in seven different cinemas throughout the city. Prizren welcomed almost 300 international visitors, including well-known figures. Film screenings, seminars, discussions, and concerts drew a record number of people. It also implements various projects throughout the year focused on raising film awareness and education. With the *School and Documentary Film - Promotion of democratic ideals of human rights through documentary film* program, they used documentary film as a teaching instrument to educate youngsters about human rights.<sup>38</sup> They also provided funds for young filmmakers from the Balkans to produce documentary films addressing this theme through a project financed by the European Commission called *Human Rights Film Factory – tales from the fringes of Kosovo*.<sup>39</sup>

**Skena-up**, founded in 2003 in Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo, was an international film and theater festival for students. It served as the only place where students from the Faculty of Arts of Prishtina could screen their student films, interact with the public and compete with film students from the region and the world. It played an essential role in developing young artists as it was very rich in the program, bringing a lot of international filmmakers and visitors with whom the local filmmakers could exchange experiences, build friendships and develop possible co-operations. Unfortunately, the festival ceased existence after 2015 due

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38 School and Documentary. Interview with Eroll Bilibani. Jugend Film Tage, 2017, [https://jugendfilmtage.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Interview\\_Eroll\\_Bilibani\\_Def.pdf](https://jugendfilmtage.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Interview_Eroll_Bilibani_Def.pdf).

39 Willis, Kim. *Moving pictures: a film festival in Kosovo*. The Guardian, 02 Aug. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2014/aug/02/kosovo-film-festival-prizren>

to the lack of funding.<sup>40</sup>

Another festival founded in 2003 was the **Nine Eleven Dedication Festival**, dedicated in memory of the lives lost in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. It began as a film, sculpture, and modern design competition, expressing the artist's points of view on that particular day.<sup>41</sup> It was organized by Prishtina Film and Kosova Initiative for Democratic Society as a way of thanking the United States for its role in the state formation of Kosovo and sharing the pain of the attacks. Nine Eleven was particular because it produced the films it screened. It offered an excellent opportunity for young filmmakers who could apply with their projects. Screenwriters applied with their scripts which afterward got matched with a director while Prishtina Film helped them complete the rest of the crew. The festival lasted ten years and produced tens of short films until the last edition in 2013. Even though the budget it provided for the short films was minimal, it managed to produce good films which had international success, like the short film *Kthimi* (The Return) 2012, which got awarded at Sundance.

**Prishtina International Film Festival**, commonly known as the Pristina Film Festival and PriFest, is an annual film festival held in Pristina, Kosovo, showcases major international film productions from the Balkan region and beyond, as well as promotes the Kosovar film industry. It got established following Kosovo's decla-

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40 *Fillon festivali SKENA UP*. Kosovo Cinematography Center, <https://qkk-rks.com/sq-al/info-lajme/174/fillon-festivali-skena-up>. Web accessed, 08.02.2021.

41 *About the Festival*. 9/11 Dedication Festival, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111003000002/911festival.com>. Accessed from the archive, 29.08.2022

ration of independence in 2008. The festival paused in 2015 as well, for the same reason as Skena-up, because of the lack of funding, and held a no-budget event in Tirana instead, called *PriFest in Exile*. However, in contrast to Skena-up, Prishtina International Film Festival solved the financial situation following the next year and still runs today.<sup>42</sup>

In recent years, PriFilm Fest became one of the few places to screen or hold national premieres of films subsidized by Kosovafilm. On the last edition of the festival, August 2021, PriFest had the national premieres of *Hive* by Blerta Basholli, *Looking for Venera* by Norika Sefa, and *Andromeda Galaxy* by More Raça, all of them feature films subsidized by taxpayers money. These films are usually not accessible otherwise.

**Anibar** is a non-profit organization created by a group of young art activists in 2010. The Anibar International Animation Festival (AIAF) is the organization's main yearly event, which takes place in Peja, Kosovo, in August. Anibar aims to introduce people in Kosovo to the most recent global animation trends. Its goal is to assist and inspire Kosovo youth to use animation to express themselves and their views while discussing themes they care about. They can bring up more topics through cultural activism and break civic apathy. Anibar organizes capacity-building events such as training seminars and workshops, film screenings, discussions, and other events. Anibar has a similar effect on its host city Peja, as Dokufest has for Prizren, bringing attention and visitors to a town where not much happens.

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<sup>42</sup> Petkovic, Vladan. *PriFest cancelled owing to lack of state support*. Cineuropa, 24 Mar. 2015. <https://www.cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/288271/>

**FEMART** got founded in 2013 with the goal of enlarging the debate and highlighting feminism-related issues in Kosovo. The year 2022 marked its tenth anniversary. Even though FEMART is mainly a film festival - theater plays, exhibitions, podcasts, video performances, talks, murals, and other art forms are all part of the event.

Organized by ArtPolis NGO, Femart is essential as it's the only one in its nature that aims to raise gender awareness through art. It also promotes social activism and encourages close cooperation between Kosovo women and women throughout the Balkans, seeking to advance gender equality and peacebuilding. Since its inception, the FemArt festival in Kosovo has featured a comprehensive feminist creative and cultural activity program that pushes for equal rights, solidarity, and peace. The FemArt festival has evolved over the years to highlight, through various artistic forms, the realities of living in, and the harms caused by a patriarchal society. According to their statement, the festival aims to destabilize negative status quos and structures in the region, not just expose them. It provokes and challenges its viewers while also attempting to effect change.<sup>43</sup>

While there are other exciting film festivals today as well in Kosovo, festivals such as Dokufest, Aibar, and PriFest remain the most important film event in the country and they play an important role into the development and advancement of Kosovo Cinematography.

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<sup>43</sup> *About Femart*. Official Femart Website, <https://femart-ks.com/about>. Web accessed, 10.02.2021.

### III. The road to recognition, film by film

Like in most of Europe, there is no commercial film industry in Kosovo either, in the sense of having a system where movies manage to finance themselves by selling tickets. Even though almost 280 production companies are registered in the Cinematography Center<sup>44</sup>, there are less than ten functioning cinemas<sup>45</sup> in a country with a population of around 1.8 million inhabitants.<sup>46</sup> The repeated success of local films on the international scene has started to raise the interest of the random citizens of Kosovo; however, the industry is still very far from achieving sustainability. Therefore the primary goal for filmmakers remains the desire to achieve international recognition. Almost all of them aim to secure their movies a premiere in a prestigious international festival, which could influence its further journey.

The journey in film festivals is not always the best indicator for a movie, whether it is good or bad, as the filmmaker Basholli rightfully argues (Basholli). Nevertheless, for Kosovo films, it remains the measure of its success. Therefore the criteria for choosing films to present and analyze in the thesis are based on that fact, that except they got screened in word's most prestigious festivals, they were also awarded; therefore "they made it". Some of the films are also presented for

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44 *The List of Production Companies*. Kosovo Cinematography Center, <https://qkk-rks.com/en-us/production-companies/>. Web Accessed, 25.08.2022

45 *Cinemas in Kosovo*. Kosovo Cinematography Center, <https://qkk-rks.com/en-us/cinemas/>. Web Accessed, 25.08.2022

46 *Population Assessment, 2021*. Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021, <https://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/population-assessment-2021>.

the specific impact they had when they were launched, in a cinema striving for recognition.

***Kthimi (The return), 2012***, by Blerta Zeqiri, even though a short film, it had a big impact, especially among the filmmakers, as it was done in a very short time, with a small budget of around 4500 EUR, and managed to have big success. It was a breakthrough as it is the first film from Kosovo to win at a big festival such as Sundance. *The return* was a part of the Nine Eleven festival, which financed the movies it screened.

The director, Blerta Zeqiri, says she received a call from the festival director who showed her the script, written by Shefqet Gjocaj, and asked her if she could do the film within a month, as the director who had to shoot it failed for some reason. She loved the story, especially the situation in which the characters were placed. But she felt she needed to direct the story toward a different path; therefore, following the *cinéma vérité* style, she defined specific important points to lead the characters, and the rest happened spontaneously. The dialog came from the actors themselves. They started filming ten days before the screening and completed the whole film within a week - three days of shoot and four days for editing and post-production.<sup>47</sup>

*The Return* is a film about a war prisoner who gets released from a Serb prison and finally returns to his wife and son in Kosovo after four years. He struggles to continue where they left off as he meets the family's newest member. His wife, a victim of rape by Serbian police, gave birth to a cute little girl.<sup>48</sup>

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47 Zeqiri, Blerta. Personal Interview. 29 Aug. 2022.

48 Demolli, Donjeta. *Kthimi i Blerta Zeqirit në Sundance*. Kallxo.com, 08 Dec.

“Some people loved the film, but there were also those who didn’t like it. The film made people believe they could make it, especially those who didn’t like the film. It made them think that if a movie like this could go to Sundance... let’s work! We can make it too!” (Zeqiri)

As seen, even when everyone did not positively accept the film, it still had a very positive influence on the filmmakers. It proved that it is possible to shoot a film with limited time and financial resources that still can be highly successful.

*The return* is a powerful short film, especially because of its simplicity in stylistic approach, directing and editing. Sevdije Kastrati’s handheld camera masterfully follows the characters, acting like a third person in the set, enabling truthful and convincing performances. Except for the *Short Film Jury Prize* at Sundance Film Festival, *The Return* got awarded at Sarajevo, Hamptons, and Nijmegen film festivals and elsewhere.

Blerta Zeqiri started studying dramaturgy at the University of Prishtina, but her studies got interrupted by the war. She continued studying filmmaking at the University of Paris. Blerta is the first female director to shoot a feature film with funds from the Cinematography Center.

After the big impact her short film *The Return* had in promoting Kosovar cinema, Blerta Zeqiri, with her debut feature film ***Martesa (The marriage) 2017***, marked another important milestone for the local cinematography. She changed

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2011, <https://kallxo.com/gjate/kthimi-i-blerta-zeqirit-ne-sundance/>

the perception that local arthouse films do not do well in cinemas, as they do not appeal to the masses. After its successful premiere at Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival,<sup>49</sup> *The Marriage* started screening at Cineplexx cinema in Prishtina. The tickets got sold immediately, and they had to increase the screening times from twice to three times a day to accommodate the interested viewers. According to Cineplexx, it was the most watched film of the week, in competition with Hollywood blockbusters.<sup>50</sup> In a press release, the producer of the film, Kreshnik Keka Berisha, who is also the co-writer and the editor of the film, stated:

“We were satisfied with the world premiere in Tallinn, with the awards and excellent reviews from Variety magazine and Cineuropa, but I never expected this much interest from the Kosovar public. I never expected the viewers would need to buy tickets much earlier to find a seat, and people to get turned back because all the tickets got sold.” (Berisha)<sup>51</sup>

*The Marriage*, was the first film that began raising the public’s interest in home-made films, surprising even its authors, but other filmmakers as well. Mrs. Basholli shared that:

“When Blerta’s movie Martesa came out in cinemas, there was

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49 *The Marriage* received two awards at Tallinn Festival, the Fipresci Award and Special Jury Prize for the Ensemble of Cast.

50 Albanian Film ‘The Marriage’ Breaks the Record at Cineplexx, Surpassing Even the World Premieres. Telegrafi, 02 Feb 2018, <https://telegrafi.com/rekord-ne-cineplex-nga-premiera-shqiptare-martesa-tejkalon-edhe-premier-at-boterore/>.

51 *The Marriage*, the most watched film in Cineplexx. KultPlus, 8 Feb. 2018, <https://www.kultplus.com/filmi/filmi-martesa-filmi-shikuar-ne-cineplexx/>.



an audience, much more than the movies shown on ABC and the movies of older directors. That was a turning point because we understood that if we make a good movie and bring it to a place people want to go, they will go and see it. Afterward, there were other films with bigger audiences, but *Martesa* made the audience think that a local film is worth watching.” (Basholli)

*Martesa* tells the story of a young couple, Anita and Bekim, who are preparing for their wedding. Things seem to go well until Nol, groom-to-be’s gay lover, comes back from London, where he migrated years ago. Nol and Bekim are still in love with each other.

The story has an LGBT angle, making it one of the first films from Kosovo to deal with that topic. It is made with a very passionate and sincere approach and has a similar style to her previous film, *The Return*, where the camera works in favor of the story and performances. The performance of the actors caught in this triangle is excellent and natural. The film contains love scenes between gay lovers, which are very bravely shot and comes as a surprise to the Kosovo audience, who is not used to films dealing with LGBT problems, especially not in this way. The story happens in post-war Kosovo, where the main characters still struggle with their traumas. *The Marriage* was made in co-production with Albania. Even though an unusual topic for the local audience, Zharku claims that:

“Among juries we placed together, there has never been a debate about whether a gay film should be supported. While in the

region's countries, a gay story did not have a chance to pass, in our country, it passed, and they were successful and very well accepted." (Zharku)

Another film to have a huge impact, especially on the local audiences, is the short film ***Shok (Friend)*, 2015**, directed by British director Jamie Donoughue and produced by Eshref Durmishi, a Kosovo - United Kingdom co-production. *Shok* tells a shocking story of a friendship between two young boys during extreme times like the war in Kosovo. As they struggle for survival, their friendship gets challenged.

Except for its great success by receiving around twenty awards in important short film festivals such as Aspen Shortfest, Hollyshorts Film Festival, Interfilm, etc., *Shok* became the first film from Kosovo to get nominated for Oscars.<sup>52 53</sup> It marked a significant milestone in promoting Kosovo on the international film scene, empowering filmmakers, and promoting Kosovo cinema to the local population. As Zharku puts it:

"*Shok*, had a bigger impact, especially to the local audiences as it had a huge PR. It also helped in the image of the country and made people believe that if you work well, you can reach even Oscars" (Zharku)

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52 *Shok* got nominated in the Live Action Short category at 2016 Academy Awards

53 La Porta, Domenico. *Shok: The kids with the bike are on their way to Hollywood*. Cineuropa, 12 Feb 2016, <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/305271/>

That is since random people who might have never heard of Sundance or Cannes festivals are all familiar with the Oscars.

After all the success the short films had in promoting the cinema, raising awareness about the film, and bringing young filmmakers to the light, the first feature film to make a major breakthrough was ***Babai (Father) 2015***. A debutante film from young Kosovo-born writer-director Visar Morina, who got educated in Germany.

*Father* is a co-production between Kosovo, Germany, Macedonia, and France, and it was the most expensive Kosovan film by the time it got produced. It got made with a total budget of 1.9 million euros. The film *Babai* premiered at the Munich Film Festival and collected three German Cinema New Talent awards, plus the Lutheran Interfilm's One Future Prize. It also succeeded in Karlovy Vary by winning the best director award and the Europa Cinema Label's prize for the best European film. In addition to the success in festivals, *Babai* also got a theatrical release in Germany.<sup>54</sup>

*Babai*, a father-son story, is set in the 90s in Kosovo, a country filled with poverty. It is about the ten-year-old boy Nori, who, together with his father, Gzim, sells cigarettes on the streets for survival. The drama begins when Gezim, after many attempts, manages to flee Kosovo for Germany. Nori, also abandoned by his mother, does the impossible to join his father. He jumps on a perilous trip through illegal routes. Being a German immigrant himself, the director Visar Morina, who

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54 Simon, Alissa. *Karlovy Vary Film Review: Babai*. Variety Magazine, 11 Jul. 2015, <https://variety.com/2015/film/markets-festivals/karlovy-vary-film-review-babai-1201537665/>

spent seven years developing the script, genuinely presents the atmosphere of violence and poverty that dominated Kosovo in the 90s.

The film got shot by Germany-based cinematographer Matteo Cocco who did a fantastic job using a hand-held camera and documentary approach, empowering the drama while looking amazingly beautiful visually. The set design and costumes are compelling and realistic, for where and when the story happens, which is fantastic knowing that the set designer and costume designer were not from Kosovo.

Like this film's case, the multi-state production and multicultural crew are one of the characteristics of Kosovo's after-war cinematography, strengthening it and bringing much refreshment. It successfully fills the gap of the lack of film professionals, especially producers in Kosovo.

The film managed to successfully distribute to the festivals and secure a theatrical release in Germany, which proves to be a serious difficulty in most cases of Kosovo-alone productions.

After the success of *Babai* and *Martesa* and the rest of the films, there came many other powerful films which were premiered and awarded in the world's most prestigious festivals and filled the local cinemas at the same time. The interest in the film of the general population kept growing after each film, and soon it became normal for a local film to fill the cinemas. Mr. Puka, the manager of Cineplexx Cinema in Prishtina, in an interview for the local television KTV declared that the film *Hive* broke all the records by selling around 27,000 tickets since its release, and it is still screening. It became the most watched film of the year, surpassing even the

international premieres, which was unexpected.<sup>55</sup>

While the modern cinema of Kosovo is still shaping with each film's release, 2021 marked the most successful year for cinematography, putting the cherry on top for the new movement on the make. *Hive* by Berta Basholli, *Looking for Venera* by Norika Sefa, *Vera dreams of the sea* by Kaltrina Krasniqi, and *The hill where lionesses roar* by Luana Bajrami, they made history by being premiered and awarded at some of the world's top prestigious film festivals, strengthening Kosovo's position in the world's cinematography.

One of the first things noticable in the collection of these films is the fact that they are feature films shot by debutante directors, almost all of them made by female directors and they deal with similar topics, such as women position in a traditional and patriarchal society.

**Zgjoj (Hive)** 2021, a debutante film written and directed by Blerta Basholli, takes place in postwar Kosovo, in *Krusha e madhe* village, which lost almost all its men during the war; they either got killed or are still missing. It is based on the true story of Fahrije Hoti, who lost her husband. Being in poor economic condition, to support her kids, she decides to open up a small business and engage the other women from the village as well. Her acts enrage the rural village with patriarchal mentality, who would rather have their woman stay home and respect the traditions, instead of working with other people.

*Zgjoj* is an empowering story of a woman who does not give up until she suc-

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55 *Zgjoj, filmi më i shikuar i vitit 2021 në Cineplexx*. Interview with mr. Defrim Puka. KTV, 18 Dec. 2021, <https://youtu.be/nj5Vgc9tMWU>

ceeds, proving everyone wrong. At the same time is an empowering film for a country with a male tradition in filmmaking, proving that woman-made films can surpass them. It is a co-production between Kosovo, Switzerland, Albania, and North Macedonia.

***Në kërkim të Venerës (Looking for Venera)*** 2021, is also a debutante film written, directed and co-produced by the young director Norika Sefa. With a very original approach, it is one of the most authorial films made in the modern cinema of Kosovo, the film is visually stunning. With fixed camera angles, mostly positioned towards the wall or the furniture, where characters enter and leave the frame, it conveys the lack of personal space in the environment where the story takes place. As a kid of the 90s, growing up in an environment with similar furniture and atmosphere, it almost felt like one could hear the smell of the wood as if being physically present on the scene.

*Në kërkim të Venerës* is a coming-of-age film set in a traditional rural village where the image of the family is sacred. The role of the female in such a society is already pre-defined, leaving no space for self-exploration. Venera stays truthful to herself, her feelings, and her beliefs by challenging almost everybody: her family, society, and her friends.

Norika did a fantastic job by finding the perfect cast for Venera's role. Kosovare Krasniqi, even though very talented, she is a non-professional actress, playing for the first time in this film. Norika spent months looking for different girls for the role of Venera, and she met hundreds of potential candidates until she met Kosovare.

She says, laughing:<sup>56</sup>

“At some point, my whole life turned into a search for Venera.” (Sefa)

Norika’s effort paid off, and Kosovare was awarded twice for her acting. She got awarded at Hong Kong and Valencia film festivals.

Looking for Venera is a co-production between Kosovo and North Macedonia.

***Vera andrron detin (Vera Dreams of the Sea)*** 2021, a feature film shot by debutant director Kaltrina Krasniqi and written by Dori Basha, is a co-production between Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. It tells the story of Vera, a sign language interpreter who gets widowed at the film’s beginning, when her husband commits suicide. After the death of her husband, Fatmir, a famous judge, she hopes to sell the uninhabited house they have in the village in order to offer a better life for her daughter and her niece. Even though she legally inherits the property, she inherits a lot of problems at the same time. Loansharks are after her, pressuring her to sign off the house, which Fatmir lost due to his gambling habit, a secret he kept until his death.

The movie tells a powerful story portraying the post-war society, the construction craziness, and the patriarchal mentality according to which women cannot inherit property—an issue that Kaltrina’s mother went through herself after her divorce.

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<sup>56</sup> Sefa, Norika. Personal Interview. 21 Jul. 2022.

***Luaneshat e kodrës (The Hill Where Lionesses Roar)*** 2021, written and directed by young franco-kosovar Luana Bajrami who was only nineteen when she shot the film, is a co-production between France and Kosovo and United States.<sup>57</sup>

It tells a story of three rebellious teenage girls, thirsty for freedom in an isolated village with provincial mentality. Coming from troubled and often violent families, they lose the hope for a decent future in the city, after they get rejected from the university. The story happens in a remote village in Kosovo, where the young director spent her childhood. It is a story about youth, masterfully directed by the young director. Before jumping on directing, Luana acted on few TV shows, short and feature films, like "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" by french director Céline Sciamma where she played Sophie.

Even though done by a nineteen year old director, *The hill where lionesses roar* is one of the most mature films of the modern cinema of Kosovo. Luana very smartly used her original point of view as a diaspora kid, observing local peers, by placing herself on the movie, acting the fourth girl who comes to the village for summer vacation. After her big success with her first feature, Luana is already preparing for the next one<sup>58</sup>.

Other great short and feature films also contributed to the advancement of Kosovo cinematography, which are worth mentioning. Lendita Zeqiraj, with her

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57 Cineuropa. "Review: The Hill Where Lionesses Roar". Web Accessed 01.03.2022. <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/407092/>

58 *Winning Projects from the 2021 Call*. KCC, 31 Dec. 2021, [qkk-rks.com/uploads/files/2022/February/02/Konkursi\\_2021\\_Projektet\\_fituese\\_dhe\\_shuma\\_e\\_subvencionit1643835257.pdf](https://qkk-rks.com/uploads/files/2022/February/02/Konkursi_2021_Projektet_fituese_dhe_shuma_e_subvencionit1643835257.pdf).



short films *Ballkoni* (Balcony) 2013<sup>59</sup> and *Fence* (Gardhi)<sup>60</sup> 2018, went to hundreds of festivals worldwide and received tens of awards. Afterward, she shot her feature film *Shpija e Ages* (Aga's House), which was premiered and awarded at Karlovy Vary Film Festival and had great international success. *Aga's House* was also screened at local cinemas and raised significant interest from local audiences.

*Zana* 2019 by Antoneta Kastrati by Los Angeles based Kosovo-born director got premiered at Toronto Film Festival<sup>61</sup>, it was very well accepted locally and internationally, and it was awarded in many festivals<sup>62</sup>.

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59 *Ballkoni* (Balcony). IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2880042/>. Web Accessed. 28.08.2022.

60 *Gardhi* (Fence). IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6214668>. Web Accessed. 28.08.2022.

61 *Antoneta Kastrati's Debut Feature Film, Zana, from Kosovo/Albania to World Premiere at Toronto Film Festival*. KCC, 8 Aug. 2019, [qkk-rks.com/en-us/info-news/597/antoneta-kastratis-debut-feature-film-zana-from-kosovo-albania-to-world-premiere-at-toronto-film-festival/](http://qkk-rks.com/en-us/info-news/597/antoneta-kastratis-debut-feature-film-zana-from-kosovo-albania-to-world-premiere-at-toronto-film-festival/).

62 *Zana* 2021 IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6214668>. Web Accessed. 28.08.2022.

#### **IV. A film movement, mainly led by female directors**

There was this idea, this notion among the filmmakers in Kosovo, especially from the older generation, that directing film is a profession exclusively for men. I have heard many times from my teachers during my studies that directing is equally hard as the job of a miner. It is quite physical and tiring as you must take care of everything on the set. Therefore it is not a profession for women.

Kaltrina Krasniqi said that at least once during their studies, she and almost all of her female colleagues were approached by their teachers, who asked if they were sure they wanted to be directors. She says that:

“ It always felt like going against all odds. Like the salmon at the end of their lifecycle when they swim against the river’s current. They would ask: Why are you doing this job? Even if you’re talented, at some point, you’ll get married. You are just taking someone else’s place.” (Krasniqi)

Blerta Zeqiri experienced the same thing. When she met her teachers, one of them even tried to convince her not to apply. He insisted on the same argument that she was just taking the place of some men who would actually do something with directing. She says:

“They told me: Directing is not for woman, you have to go out of home late in the night, go very early on the set, etc.” (Zeqiri)

While Norika Sefa did not experience such a thing as she studied filmmaking in Denmark and the Czech Republic, she said that she also met with doubts many times during her career because of the fact that she is a woman. She said that:

“My film is very technical as it focuses on the visual aspect. Therefore most of the production team came to ask if I understood cameras; My technical knowledge has always been put in doubt. In contrast, I put much effort especially on the technical side, and I’m a freak about it.” (Sefa)

Her crew would also worry that she might get tired. According to her, the fact that they were worried stressed her and tired her for real.

Blerta Basholli and Blerta Zeqiri both talk about how they never believed they would get funds from the Cinematography Center to shoot a feature film. Zeqiri says that the old generation of filmmakers who had an influence when the Cinematography Center got formed would never trust a woman with a feature film. For them, women directors were capable of shooting only short films or something more manageable. Basholli says that the same group of old directors would always get the funds from KCC, which had a tiny budget back then. One year would win one director, and the following year the other.

Zharku also shares the opinion that in the beginning, the old generation of directors would agree with each other about who should win. It took courage to break this habit and at the same time, distance the influence of the state from the cinematography.

With hard work, sacrifice, and persistence - as Krasniqi said: "Against all odds," the young female directors broke the pattern and proved them wrong. Except for proving capable of shooting features, they challenged the whole perception of the industry and society about the local cinematography. People who never took local films seriously and complained how Kosovars do not know how to make films now have a reason to be proud of their cinema. With their success, the films of the new wave, led mainly by female directors, surpassed the whole region and earned Kosovo a place on the map of the world's cinema.

In Kosovo, the law on general elections obliges the political parties to maintain a 30% quota of woman representation on their election lists;<sup>63</sup> therefore, it greatly impacted the empowering of women and helped eliminating misogyny from public discourse. However, no such amendment exists in the Law of Cinematography, and a similar principle is not officially applied when choosing the projects to fund. Women directors have no particular facilitations. Zharku says that:

"The system that got created, it is not that it has given space to women directors, but it has given space to good creators." (Zharku)

But he argues that when they chose the people for the jury, they tried to choose people who support feminism, people who protect human rights.

This approach helped create a fair environment. Female directors succeeded as soon as they got the chance, without any favoring but just by having fair competi-

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63 Law No. 03/L-073 on General Elections in the Rep. of Kosovo. Official Gazette of RKS, 15 June 2008, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2544>

tion, only because they were good at what they did. With every success the female directors had, they became an example for the rest, empowered each other, and setting new standards.

Basholli argues that she got inspired not just from female filmmakers, but from successful women in general:

I do not know what precisely influenced the change. I think, at least for me, it was the inspiration from one another, regardless of whether women had success in sports, film, or elsewhere. I love judo and have practiced it for several months. When I saw Majlinda<sup>64</sup>, I was amazed because she was a girl who received the Olympic gold medal in a sport, which is mainly a men's sport, and she won the main prize." (Basholli)

With the success of her short film *The return*, Zeqiri empowered not just women but practically every filmmaker in the country. At the same time, when she applied for funds for her feature, she left no place for doubt that she could break another milestone with her film *The Mariage*. In this way women were set free from the notion that dominated not just Kosovo but Balkan in general, that "You can't do it because you are a woman".

The fact that female directors mainly led this movement became one of its defining characteristics, making it even more powerful and unique, as it is the only national film movement in the world to be dominated by female directors.

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64 Majlinda Kelmendi ensured Kosovo's first-ever Olympic medal by winning the women's 52 kilograms category in judo at Rio 2016

## **V. Powerful female in the leading role**

One of the themes that dominate the films of modern cinema in Kosovo is the patriarchal traditions rooted in society. Almost all the movies deal with this theme in one way or another. Even though such practices belong to the past and are mainly enforced in rural areas or less educated families, it was a part of Kosovo's culture not long ago. Its leftovers are still present in people's behavior, sometimes resulting in sexism, misogyny, and violence against women.

Visar Morina, in his film *Babai*, reveals the whole hierarchy of the roles deriving from such organization of family and social behavior. In his film, Nori and his father, Gezim, live in a big family, where the head of the family has the final word on everything and everyone. In such a system, even men suffer as they have to obey and put themselves in second place for the family's good. In *Babai*, the main one to challenge that system is little Nori. He decides to steal the family money, knowing it would break his uncle's wedding plans, only to go after his father, who abandoned him and went to Germany to provide for the family. Everything else is unfair for him.

The rest of the films, like *Hive*, *Looking for Venera*, *Vera dreams of the sea* and *The Hill where Lionesses Roar*, they all deal with women position in such kind of social system and mentality, but each of them deals with the topic in different way. They explore kinds of situations with different approach.

*Hive*, tells the true story of Fahrije, who has to face a whole village in order to

exercise her fundamental right of working, just to be able to sustain her family. She faces prejudice, stigma and even get physically attacked when they brake her cars window using a stone. In *Looking for Venera*, the main character feels like everyone is stakeholder upon her body, and everyone knows better than her what she is supposed to do. In *Vera dreams of the sea*, Vera has to face mafia to protect her property, after being humiliated by her husbands family, how she has no son who could be the right inheritant of the property. In *The hill where lionesses roar*, nobody seems to care that the thre "lionesses" are not accepted in the university. Their position in the society is already pefedined, therefore they need no univer-tity education for that.

But even though these films treat a similar topic, they're all made with a differ-ent stylistic approach and are unique. Çitaku also argues that:

"An interesting element of these films is their uniqueness. They way each of them tell the story is very diverse. Some of the stories are based on actual events which adds to them. All these directors were independent in their journey in terms of how they treated the film, from the writing, production and all the way to the production phase." (Çitaku)

*Looking for Venera* is very obsessed with photography, space, and time. Every frame feels like a standalone picture from the 90s, even though, throughout the film, we never get any hint about the specific period in which the story takes place. The film's mood, the relationship of the characters, and the way they interact in

these closed spaces give us the feeling of the 90s, but again, the story can be from any time or place. In *Hive*, the power of the film lies in the story, which is based on the real-life of the character Fahrije. Basholli masterfully approaches directing with the goal of bringing her life to the surface in a very raw and sincere way, working in favor of the story. The frame does not necessarily hunt for a beautiful picture or aesthetics as much as it does for a powerful performance.

*Vera dreams of the sea* goes for a golden middle. While using visual elements, such as the element of the sea and camera movements, to empower the drama, at the same time, Krasniqi refrains from overusing these elements not to overshadow the performances. *The hill where lionesses roar* is unique, mainly because it decently represents the youth, not just by telling a youth story but by having a youthful and brave approach to how the story is told. There are many elements in the film, like the scale of the criminal enterprise they build, the way Qe runs away from home, and other situations which don't necessarily correspond with our expectations. Still, they bravely fit with the ambitions of the youth the film represents.

The power of these films lies in the fact that in each of these films, the female protagonists are not presented as victims, no matter their struggles, but as powerful characters who don't give up. Going against the circumstances, they succeed. In *Hive*, Fahrije becomes a successful businesswoman and improves the lives of all her fellow villagers who stood up against her, completely changing the mentality of her village. When talking about Basholli's motivation to make the film, she said:

"I focused on what I wanted the audience to feel when seeing



the film. Do I want to give you some hope? Fahrie's story is hopeful and inspiring, so I wanted to give the audience the same feeling she gave me. Women in Kosovo are generally very strong. They went through a lot and still found a way to carry on.

We all feel like giving up sometimes, but if Fahrije found the opportunity, we should all try." (Basholli)

In Krasniqi's film, Vera finds the courage to counter the loan sharks who are after her property, to protect what belongs to her. Krasniqi says about her character that:

"Vera is collateral damage in development - when a road has to be built, everyone believes that she will follow tradition and not cause problems. While surprisingly, she does not accept this narrative. What do we do now? They go with the old methods, which are "threats," because you are weaker." (Krasniqi)

She pulls back only when her daughter and niece get threatened and submits to their demands. However, she doesn't stand still. At the film's end, Vera publishes the incriminating tape and exposes their wrongdoing.

Krasniqi says that one of the reasons she liked the script and decided to direct Vera dreams of the sea, is because:

"Vera, the main character, was 60 years old. I couldn't remember any play or movie where the main character is a woman of that

age. Usually, that character is the second character, and that character is often stereotyped. It's not common to have a 60-year-old woman in the lead role." (Krasniqi)

In Sefa's film, even though a fragile teenage girl, Venera never gives up on herself and her right to explore the life in front of her. Except she faces her father, she even encourages her mother to stand up for herself and have her moment of rebellion. The three lionesses in Bajrami's film are presented as fragile but powerful girls who lean on each other to counter the world. They don't accept what their society offers them; therefore, they go all-in to fight for freedom and their place in the world.

The fact that these films tell the stories of powerful women, has a very empowering effect to the viewers, especially to the women audience because they tell stories of success and cover characters which are usually not represented in film.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Whether what we see now in the cinema of Kosovo can be called a movement or not is pretty debatable. The same applies to the question of what can be called a film movement. A quote by American anthropologist Margaret Mead says:

“Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.” (Margaret Mead)

This thesis tries to convey that something similar happened with the cinematography of Kosovo as well. With their debuting films, a group of young but committed filmmakers occupied the screens of the world’s most prestigious film festival, earned international recognition, and changed how films were made and perceived in the country. Although these films, even though quite unique and different, they share similar patterns in how they’re made, the stories they tell, and the motivation to tell them.

Almost all of the films are subsidized through the Cinematography Center and made in co-production with other states, especially the ones that KCC has agreements with. They’re all made with the festivals in mind, out of the need to share personal experiences in a country in formation, a country aiming for recognition. This movement is unique because it is mainly led by female directors while challenging society with a patriarchal tradition.

While Çitaku argues that it can be called a movement because of its specific

timing in history and the impact of similar events. It portrays a cultural transition and a transition between generations while bringing quite a uniqueness - Basholli claims this is not just a movement but more of an explosion.

Except in film, women in Kosovo excelled and surpassed men in sports, music, and politics, improving the image of Kosovo worldwide. Mrs. Vjosa Osmani is the second female president of the country. While the first president Mrs. Atifete Jahjaga got elected through an agreement between the political parties<sup>65</sup>, Osmani was the most voted person in the history of Kosovo.<sup>66</sup>

Even though the situation is far from perfect, the improvement of women's position is quite visible in the vibrant society of Kosovo. What exactly led to women's empowerment and emancipation is a very broad topic and deserves a thesis in itself. Zeqiri argues that economic independence also played a role; after the war, many young women found jobs in international organizations and became independent from their families. Modernization of families also played a role, according to her, but politics as well. According to Krasniqi, because of the problematic situation in pre-war Kosovo, men could not fully play their role in the patriarchal system; often, they could not provide for their families. They were never in a position to enforce that kind of system completely. Çitaku, who made a documentary about women's protests against the regime and women's resistance in the 90s, argues that we always had power female in Kosovo, and men were never in a position to

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65 Gashi, Zijadin. *Atifete Jahjaga gets elected as a president*. Radio free Europe, 04 Apr. 2011. <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/3550473.html>

66 *Historical record, Vjosa Osmani the most voted person ever in Kosovo*. Politiko, 04 March 2021, <https://politiko.al/english/kosova/rekord-historik-vjosa-osmani-personi-me-i-votuar-ndonjehere-ne-kosove-i431283>

allow or not to allow anything.

Sefa argues that Kosovo society is not just patriarchal, but it is hierarchical in its roots at the same time, a hierarchy where men have their role as well. A hierarchy which Krasniqi says the war has destroyed it:

“The war also destroyed the hierarchy because if the man was at the head of the family during that time, he could not keep that role. We never talked about these topics. The hierarchical order within the family got destabilized.” (Krasniqi)

Therefore it is a combination of different elements. However, among all, it is the change in public discourse, which provided a safer environment for women to create, and the impact women had in empowering each other by being an example of success. The powerful characters in the leading roles of these female directors are evidence of that.

While the Cinematography Law, approved in the parliament in 2004, based on which the Cinematography Center got founded in 2008, boosted the development of cinema, brought talented directors to the surface, and helped produce tens of great films, it still has many deficiencies. According to Mr. Çitaku, who is leading the commission drafting the new law, many things still need to be changed. Especially when it comes to making it easier for filmmakers to sustain themselves with their films, regulate the distribution, boost promotion and invest more in education.

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