

Scenography and Costumes in the Early Years of Albanian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role and impact of scenography and costumes in the creation of the identity of Albanian cinema, with a particular focus on the post-war period when Albanian cinema began to develop. Visual elements, such as scenography and costumes, contributed to the formation of a unique aesthetic and reflected the social and political realities of the time.

Through an analysis of several well-known works from that period, the study will evaluate the importance of these two aspects in creating the atmosphere and reflecting the characters, conveying ideological messages and thus giving Albanian cinema a new artistic and cultural dimension. The analysis will focus on how these visual elements were closely linked to the themes and the social-political context of the time, offering a rich perspective on their impact on the formation of the visual identity of Albanian cinema.

By studying the work of well-known artists in scenography and costume design from that period, the study will assess the impact of scenography and costumes on Albanian cinema, creating a visual language that served to articulate narratives and assist in transmitting the ideological messages of the communist regime, which rigorously controlled every aspect of cultural and artistic life.

Scenography in early Albanian cinema was closely linked to the social reality of the time, often using traditional elements and influences from Albanian folk art, while attempting to reflect significant social and historical events and themes. In the early years of Albanian cinema, scenography was still an area that developed slowly, with limited opportunities for technology and resources.

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Received: July 02, 2025; **Accepted:** July 07, 2025; **Published:** July 14, 2025

Keywords: Albanian Cinema, Scenography, Costumes, Visual Elements, Aesthetic Impact

Introduction

The Albanian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s is a complex reflection of Albanian society, which had just emerged from World War II and was trying to build a new socialist identity. It represents not only an artistic enterprise but also a powerful propaganda tool used by the communist regime to construct the new national identity and articulate the ideological messages of a society entering the era of socialism and consolidating its power. Beyond direction and scripts, two essential elements in building the cinematic atmosphere and strengthening the visual message were scenography and costumes. In this context, these visual elements played a fundamental role in creating a unique visual language that helped convey social and ideological messages.

Historical and Political Context of the Early Years of Albanian Cinema

This study focuses precisely on the role of scenography and costumes in the early years of Albanian cinema, analyzing how these two components contributed to the formation of the aesthetic and cultural identity of films from that period. It will particularly examine the early period of Albanian cinema. Through the analysis of films such as *Fëmijët e saj* (1957) and *Tana* (1958), we will

explore how visual art intertwined with politics, social reality, and popular culture. These films are more than just artistic works: they are mirrors of the time, coded bearers of ideological messages, and instruments for building a visual language that remained powerful for decades.

After World War II, Albania entered a new phase of social and political construction, under a communist regime oriented towards the Soviet model, a system aimed at reshaping society and national consciousness according to Marxist-Leninist ideology. In this process, art and culture were powerful tools for mass education, with cinema playing a special role. They were placed at the service of ideology, promoting values such as labor, collectivization, honesty, and commitment to the homeland. Films produced during this period had not only artistic values but also political functions; they were tools for social education, conveying messages of solidarity, the role of labor, sacrifice for the homeland, class struggle, and the construction of socialism.

In this context, scenography and costumes became key elements. As part of the visual appearance of the film, they were meant to reflect not only the reality and socialist idealism but also the model desired by the regime. They were charged with symbolism, where every element, from the bare walls of a poor house to the simple clothes of workers or the bright colors of the flag, had its function

in conveying the message.

The filmic environments and the way characters were visually presented were designed to depict a poor, yet proud Albania, simple but dedicated to new ideals.

Influences

Due to the proximity to Soviet models, Albanian scenography did not experiment with artistic stylizations but remained in the harsh socialist realism, where every element in the background had a clear ideological purpose.

Scenography: The Construction of The Filmic Space in Early Albanian Cinema

Scenography, as the art of constructing the filmic space, in the early years of Albanian cinema had two main sources: daily reality and popular heritage. In the early years of Albanian cinema, scenography faced several challenges: the lack of technology, lack of materials, and budget limitations. However, artists managed to create spaces that not only reflected social reality but also reinforced the ideological narrative of the films. The main characteristics included minimalism due to the lack of resources, the use of real environments, a focus on common spaces like rural or urban houses, and symbolism linked to honesty and progress. Simple villages, urban buildings, and muddy streets were used to create an authentic image of Albanian life and the symbolism connected to honesty and progress.

But beyond realism, scenography aimed to highlight contrasts: the poverty inherited from the past and the optimism of building a new society, ruined village houses compared to new objects created by the cooperative, bare walls symbolizing sacrifice but also determination.

The Role of Costumes: Conveying Identity and Ideology

Costumes in Albanian films of this period had two main functions: to represent the social identity of the character and to convey the ideological messages the regime wanted to emphasize. Simplicity and modesty were essential, avoiding luxury. Characters in the films, according to their social position, were dressed in clothes that represented modesty, honesty, and labor.

For example, workers and peasants were dressed in simple costumes, often in neutral colors, emphasizing their connection with the land and labor. In the case of the socialist woman, as seen in the character of Tana, the outfit was a blend of traditional folk elements and a new sense of modernity, marking her new role in society.

Also, in films where 'class enemies' or figures representing the bourgeois past were depicted, costumes were more sophisticated, often rich in details that implied decadence and detachment from the people's reality.

Main Principles

- Simplicity and modesty, especially for positive characters.
- Work clothes and folk costumes to emphasize the connection with tradition and labor.
- Avoidance of luxury or sophisticated details that would be interpreted as signs of bourgeois decadence.

Analysis of the Film "Fëmijët e saj" (1957)

"Fëmijët e saj," directed by Hysen Hakani, with a script by Hysen Hakani, artistic direction by Namik Prizreni, and music by Tish

Daija, takes place in a remote mountain village where a rabid dog bites Fatima's son. The woman must decide whether to take her son to the doctor or to Aunt Remja, an elderly woman practicing witchcraft. The film was produced during a period when Albania had begun building a socialist system, and Marxist-Leninist ideology was the basis of all cultural and artistic life. It is one of the earliest Albanian films that depicts the difficult reality of a single mother. The film serves as a mirror of that time, where art, including cinema, was used as an educational and propagandistic tool for building the "new socialist man".

In this context, scenography and costumes are not just visual embellishments; they carry ideological and aesthetic functions: they convey the atmosphere of the time, the social condition of the characters, and the messages the film aims to communicate.

The scenography in this film is simple, built mainly on family closed spaces, where every object on stage has a clear symbolic function, reflecting social insecurity. The spaces are narrow, emphasizing poverty and lack of comfort. Interiors are simple, often with bare walls, minimal furniture, muddy streets, and dim lighting. All these elements do not serve only for authenticity, but create a heavy atmosphere reflecting a difficult life and a sense of pressure and sacrifice. These visual choices create an emotional atmosphere that expresses the inner tension of the characters.

Symbolism in the Environment

Every object placed on stage has a function: empty clay pots, a dress hanging on the wall, or an old chair serve as metaphors for lack, struggle, and sacrifice. Dimly lit windows and shadows in the background create a sense of isolation and a silent struggle with life.

Purposeful Simplicity

The costumes in "Fëmijët e saj" are minimalist and functional, but chosen with care. Women are dressed in dark dresses, often without embellishments, representing honesty, modesty, and resilience in the face of difficulties. Men appear in work clothes or traditional costumes. There is no symbol of luxury or decadence to maintain coherence with the philosophy of the "new socialist man." Children's costumes are also simple, often patched, but represent innocence and the struggle for life in a harsh reality. They symbolize a new generation growing up in the spirit of sacrifice, emphasizing their difficult economic situation. These visual details help create a portrait of honesty, which is essential to the ideological narrative of the film. This deep realism is part of the film's effort to present not only an individual story but also a portrait of Albanian society during that period.

Ideological Coding in Clothing

The film distinguishes between characters representing progress and those who remain in the old mindset. This is reflected in the colors, cuts, and cleanliness of costumes: positive characters are usually dressed in cleaner, more orderly clothes, while antagonists are more neglected in appearance.

The Dual Function of Visual Elements Building Character through Costume

There is no clear division between scenography and costumes; both interact to build character. The appearance of the characters is in harmony with the environment: a woman dressed simply in a dark kitchen reinforces the figure of sacrifice and devotion.

Emotional Impact on the Viewer

Scenography and costumes emotionally impact the viewer by helping create a connection between the viewer and the presented reality. They build an atmosphere that evokes pain, solidarity, and effort, feelings that are meant to inspire in the audience a sense of responsibility and the construction of socialism.

Comparison with Later Films

Compared to films such as “Tana” (1958), which showcases more rural space and visual optimism, “Fëmijët e saj” remains more introspective and confined in its scenographic nature. In both cases, however, costumes and environments serve the same purpose of conveying the message: building a new world. But in “Fëmijët e saj”, this new world arises from suffering and sacrifice.

An Aesthetic of National and Ideological Identity

Scenography and costumes in “Fëmijët e saj” are not merely technical elements; they are essential components in creating the cinematographic language of that period. They carry ideology, emotion, and national identity, contributing to the construction of a film model that became a standard for decades in Albania.

Analysis of the Film “Tana” (1958)

In contrast, “Tana”, directed by Kristaq Dhamo, written by Kristaq Dhamo and Fatmir Gjata, with art direction by Namik Prizreni and music by Çesk Zadeja, centers around Tana, a smart girl with progressive ideas. She falls in love with Stefan, who lives in a poor mountain village. Tana faces the outdated mentality of her grandfather and the jealousy of Lefteri. It is a love story directed toward progress. Known as the first Albanian feature film, it tells a different story, that of a village entering the new era of the cooperative. Natural landscapes play a central role in the village, mountains, fields, and workspaces in the cooperative. These landscapes serve not only as a backdrop but also as symbols of the connection between humans, land, and nature, with more vibrant and optimistic imagery. Dark corners are replaced by open landscapes, fields of wheat, and groups of workers collaborating. The scenography emphasizes the connection between people and the land, highlighting the new social space being built. The interior of the cooperative is designed to reflect the modernization and progress of the time. The houses are brighter, more open, with decorative folk elements (rugs, ceramic dishes), presenting a village that, although poor, has a communal spirit and a hopeful future. Many scenes were shot in open fields, mountains, and near rivers, creating the feeling of a beautiful and vibrant Albania.

Socialist Realism in Scenography

The film is based on the principles of socialist realism, where the environment should reflect the everyday life of the working class. The scenography avoids any form of decorative aesthetics or styles that do not directly convey the ideological message. This visual scheme supports the film’s ideological message: Albanian society is leaving behind backwardness and entering a new phase of development.

Tana’s costumes, the main female character, are symbolic: she wears elements of traditional Albanian clothing, but also displays a modern simplicity that makes her a symbol of the new socialist woman. The blending of tradition with modernity in her costume clearly conveys the message that Albanian society is leaving behind the past and building a new future, with lighter and fresher colors, reflecting the energy and hope of the new generation. The extras and villagers wear regional folk costumes, maintaining local authenticity. Folk costumes are not just decorative but a

way to convey national pride and cultural continuity. Other young characters in the film are dressed in practical, simple costumes, representing the collective and unity. There is also no sign of luxury or decadence, maintaining coherence with the philosophy of the “new socialist man.”

Ideological Coding in Clothing

The film distinguishes between characters that represent progress and those that adhere to old mentalities. This is reflected in the colors, cuts, and cleanliness of the costumes. Positive characters are typically dressed in cleaner, more orderly clothing, while the antagonists appear more disheveled.

The Dual Function of Visual Elements

Character Construction through Costume

In this film, there is no clear division between scenography and costumes; both interact to build the character. The appearance of the characters harmonizes with the environment.

Emotional Impact on the Viewer

The scenography and costumes have an emotional impact on the viewer and the reality portrayed. They create an atmosphere that evokes solidarity, effort, and a sense of responsibility and commitment to building socialism.

Aesthetics of National and Ideological Identity

The scenography and costumes in “Tana” are not merely technical elements; they are essential components in creating the cinematographic language of the period. They carry emotion and national identity, ideology, and contribute to the creation of a film model that became a standard for decades in Albania.

Characteristics of Period Scenography

- Minimalism, due to financial and technical constraints.
- Use of real environments.
- Focus on ordinary spaces: simple village or town houses, muddy roads, work offices, or workshops.
- Symbolism: poor house = honesty; land = basis of existence; new enterprise.
- Folk costumes are not just decorative but a way to convey the idea of national pride and cultural continuity.
- Natural environments and optimistic scenography are part of an ideological message saying that through collectivization, the country is heading toward a better future.

Comparative Analysis of the Two Films

When comparing the two films, the difference in visual approach is clear. “Fëmijët e saj” is introspective, dark in tone, and more focused on family life and interior environments. In contrast, “Tana” opens up to the exterior landscape and focuses on collectivity. The costumes in both films reflect generational and class differences, but also share a common simplicity and lack of luxury, reinforcing the ideological messages of the regime. In both films, the scenography and costumes are not merely aesthetic elements, but serve a clear ideological function:

- In “Fëmijët e saj”, the simplicity and gloom of the costumes reflect the harsh reality, but also the dignity of survival.
- “In Tana”, the natural beauty and folk costumes serve to build a hopeful narrative for the future of society.

In both cases, they serve as a “visual language” that helps the viewer understand not only the historical context but also the political and moral purpose of the film.

Symbolism

Element	“Fëmijët e saj”	“Tana”
Emotional Tone	Dark, dramatic.	Optimistic, hopeful.
Environments	Closed, poor, minimalist.	Open, lively, natural.
Costumes	Simple, without bright colors.	National, folk with colors.
Messagee	Struggle for survival, sacrifice.	Progress through collective labor.

Creation of a National Visual Identity

Through scenography and costumes, Albanian cinema built a unique visual identity that helped reinforce ideological messages and strengthen the emotional connection with the viewer.

Artistic and Cultural Impact

Beyond its ideological function, scenography and costumes were important elements in creating an artistic identity. The scenography and costume artists not only served as executors of ideological instructions but also as creators who helped shape the visual language of Albanian film. They created an aesthetic that, despite material limitations, had the power to build a film world with strong emotional and cultural impact.

Appreciation of Artistic Heritage

Although they may seem simple or poor today, these films represent a sincere effort to create a national cinema with its own identity. The scenography and costume artists, with many material limitations, managed to provide a visual language that remains recognizable and unique to the Albanian public.

Cultural Significance and Later Impact

These two films are not just documents of a specific period; they are also the foundation of a visual language that would define Albanian cinema for decades. The scenographers and costume designers of that time had the difficult task of combining reality with idealism, they had to reflect everyday life but also project a vision of the future that was in line with ideological guidelines.

In this context, their work had great cultural significance. Through scenography and costumes, the Albanian audience began to form a visual identity that was separate from Western models and influenced primarily by the socialist countries.

This visual identity would later be enriched with other films, but the foundations were laid in films like “Fëmijët e saj” and “Tana”.

Analysis of Concrete Scenes

In “Fëmijët e saj”, one of the most meaningful scenes is when the mother sees her child suffering in the fields. The scenography is minimalist: a poor room with few pieces of furniture, emphasizing economic deprivation. The lighting is dark, creating a heavy emotional atmosphere.

In “Tana”, an iconic scene is when Tana, along with the young people from the village, works in the cooperative. The view is open, the natural landscape is filled with light, and the simple traditional costumes blend with new elements that symbolize hope for change. The camera often focuses on the characters’ faces, highlighting optimism and belief in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, scenography and costumes played an irreplaceable role in shaping the visual language of cinema. Through the analysis of the two early films, Fëmijët e saj and Tana, we can see how these elements not only served as a backdrop for the cinematic

narratives but also as powerful tools for conveying ideological messages, articulating social tensions, and constructing a national visual identity. The scenography and costumes in the early days of Albanian cinema were not merely technical elements of film production but important carriers of ideological and artistic messages. Through them, Albanian films of the communist period built a new reality, where Albanian society was portrayed as honest, hardworking, and on the path toward socialist progress. In the analysis of films like Fëmijët e saj and Tana, it is clear how these elements contributed to the creation of a unique visual identity that remained in the cultural memory of the country for decades.

Illustrations

Below are several illustrations intended to reinforce the analysis of scenography and costumes in the films “Fëmijët e saj” and “Tana”. (Note: The images are symbolic and sourced from film archives).



Figure 1: View of the central scene in “Fëmijët e saj” (the poor mother’s home)





Figure 2: Scene from the work fields in “Tana” (the cooperative and the group of young people)

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