

Here Be Dragons:

How do you get to know a place?

I come from this city, Belfast in Northern Ireland.

... but have lived in Scotland for 30 years. Before I went to Scotland as a teenager, the images of it that I had in my head were tartan, whiskey, lochs, bag pipers and the loch less monster.

But then I came here and now these are the images I have in my head. I call them home.

When you live in Scotland you do see lochs and love lochs. This is me in one, wearing a kilt no less. But this isn't a touristy thing for me. It's just what I do.

And when the sun comes out on an autumn day, if you hold a mirror up to your chin, you see this.

I feel like I've sat in a seat like this for 30 years and looked at Scotland. During this time, the berlin wall fell, and the internet came and my dad died

and I fell in love and became a filmmaker. and Scotland got a parliament and I grew older and happier. Elvis Presley could have sat and sung This Time Lord I'll Give You a Mountain here.

Now I'm going to a place that's new to me. Albania. Through the clouds. I've read one book by its Nobel nominated novelist Ismael Kadare, and I've seen some films about it. Mostly by outsiders, not Albanians.

But like most people, I've never been there before. But tonight I will be. I've been invited to the 13th Festival of Albanian Film and, as you'll see, I've a few other things to do in Albania, too. But mostly I'm going there to look. I'll listen a lot, and read too, but looking'll be my frame.

So this is a story about going and looking. And I think I know what I'll look at most in Albania: Its art and its politics. Come with me, and look with me. Cartographers wrote on the bits of old maps that they'd never visited "here be dragons" As they hadn't had real experiences in such places, they imagined that dragons lived there. Come and see if there are dragons.

I think of this scene in a Greek film, Theo Angelopoulos' The Suspended Step of the Stork. The camera cranes forward and descends, as two Greek men walk towards the border between Greece and Albania. They look into Albania. It's misty, out of focus, long lens, unknown. The man on the left has thoughts about how it feels to enter Albania.

When he was 14, Werner Herzog tried to enter the country, but couldn't, so he walked around its border instead. Recently he was invited to go there for real, but said "no I'd rather maintain the mystery."

It's November, just after dawn. I've a long day ahead.

Sometimes it's scary going somewhere you haven't been before, you can't rely on what you know.

I was here last week

A place I do know. A fountain, a classical building, touristy lights and flashes

And then I went here, Rome train station...

And, because I'm a movie buff, I thought of this scene from Vittorio de Sica's *Indiscretion of an American Wife*, which was shot here, perspective plunging, an empty platform.

And from this I thought of this.

Alfred Hitchcock's film Marnie. Exact same composition and emptiness. Surely Hitchcock saw de Sica's film.

So looking at one thing takes me to other things. To look is to travel.

Anyway, I'm up in the clouds, going to a place that I've imagined but never been. It's in Europe but hard to get to, so I have 3 flights today. Edinburgh to Amsterdam. Amsterdam to Athens and then Athens to Tirana, Albania. I've only 40 mins to change planes in Athens and the airline's saying that there's a problem with my Athens Tirana boarding pass. They won't give me one. When I tried to check in, the machine said that I'd arrive in Albania 13 hrs later than I should. At 4.54am.

That sounds, to me, like they're putting us on a bus from Athens,

north through the hills of Greece, across that line that separated Rome from Constantinople. Into the Balkans, the edgy part of Europe that most Europeans don't know too much about, even if they've been on holiday to Corfu.

I imagine being on that bus.

And I remember the story of the Oar and the Winnowing fan.

TELL STORY: It's from Homer. Ulysses has been rowing through the sea with an oar, then he steps out of his boat and starts walking into the land carrying the oar. He gets to a place in the agriculture world, where the oar no longer is recognised as an oar, people think it's a

winnowing fan. And there he decides to live. And I love that story because it's about a thing being missrecognized as another in an in-between place.

Often when you go somewhere, you read a guide-book about the place. I've done some of that about Albania but today, as I go there, I'm reading something which has nothing to do with Albania, this book on the anglo-Irish writer William Hazlitt, written by the Irish critic, Tom Paulin.

if i want to think about something, it's sometimes good to focus on something else. If a word's on the tip of your tongue, think of another word. Distract yourself

I read bits of the Hazlitt book to distract myself, and I love it. Hazlitt lived at the end of the 17 hundreds and died in 1830. the time of keats and Carlyle, Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution. A time of Art and politics, about which I think I'll hear a fair bit in the coming week in Albania. Hazlitt was a revolutionary. A bonapartian. He says that the convulsions across Europe which took place in the late 1700s were a result of the "intolerable abuses" of history. Few places have had more intolerable abuses than Albania.

Paulin says that Hazlitt lived in a time of "dioramas, fantascopes, thauatropes, illuminated spectacles and magic lantern shows which preceded modern cinema. Punning on the idea of optical projection, he imagines public opinion as resembling an audience that is watching images projected...projection is his symbol for a revolutionary state of consciousness..."

Revolutions project images of what a place should be like, rather than how they are...

Which of course makes me think of Enver Hoxha, Albania's autocratic communist leader for yonks. From the 40s to the 80s I think. Wonder will there be much talk of him there? Or has he been forgotten?

I stare out the window and worry about dashing through Athens airport, or having to get the all night bus...

But we get to Athens and this is what it's like

Not only do I not have to run. I've time to stare out the window. The plane to Tirana's a bit late. I get my boarding pass. Relax.

And then I'm on Olympic airlines. And we seem to fly through different skies and weathers. The Sun begins to set.

I drink wine and read more on Hazlitt.

His friend, Joseph Priestly, invented Soda water. Tom Paulin says that

Hazlitt associated soda water with the bubbiness of mind in the creative process.

He says that John Keats' famous line "with beaded bubbles winking at the brim" may have come from Hazlitt writing about effervescence.

Nighttime. I arrive. I'm met at the airport by Thomas Logerici and Iris Elezi. Film teachers, sages, producers, writers, directors. Iris is Albanian, Thomas is American-Albanian. They take me to dinner. We drink wine and talk ten to the dozen about Albania, what it's like.

Then I wake up and open my curtains and what is my first glimpse of daylight Albania? This. A Monet painting.

I stare at this painting. Talking with Iris and Thomas will help me see this place.

This is the first image. I go out of my hotel. Frankie Goes to Hollywood's playin in the lobby.

Here's the second. 7.30am. Mother Teresa square in Tirana. Mother Teresa was born to Albanian parents.

Fancy cars. An advert for Mango. Where's the devastation? Not what you'd expect from what was one of the poorest countries in Europe.

The building was designed by the Italian fascists, who cosied up to Albania in the 20s, then invaded in 1939

“Albania is in my heart” said Mussolini.

4 This is a colonnade in that building

Solid as marble and maths. It'll be here forever. Those fascists liked forever.

I love the way this woman walks. “Like jello on springs”.

People used to say “the streets of Tirana are so clean because Albanians have nothing to throw away.”

I film one of these fascist buildings, upside down, so it's less solid. I'm enjoying this looking.

5 It's a university. Before communism there was no university in Albania.

Young men going to study. And a leopard skin shoe.

The arches in this building are like Mussolini buildings in Rome.

Later, I see this footage of the same building from the 1960s

Back then, Hoxha had split with Soviet Russia and was flirting with Mao's China, so Albanians had to do that very Chinese thing – exercise outdoors in the morning. In 1978, Albania broke with China, leaving the country isolated.

And then when Enver died in the mid 80s, when Frankie Goes to Hollywood was on Western radio, this same street looked like this. Car-less, lined with mourners. Women wore no make-up of jewellery for a week. Enver lies in state. After Castro and Hirohito, Enver was one of the longest ruling heads of state. 40 years.

Sixth image. I walk 50 metres and stop to look at that same building today.

A dog lies outside it. Right in the middle of the traffic. Cars pass within a metre of it, on either side. Posh cars again. The cars of people doing things that Hoxha would have hated. My heart's in my mouth for the dog.

During my week here, I'll see every single fiction feature film made in Albania in the last 5 years. Again and again there are dogs in them. Dogs stand for innocence in some of the films. They're untainted by the politics

and poison of recent times in Albania. They're the anti-Enver.

And it's hard not to notice the hedge on the left. A picture hedge, a hedge curtain. How long is that fake going to be there? How many of the grieving tears for Enver were fake?

I walk another few hundred metres and then, wow, the 7th image. Right at the centre of town

What is this thing? Boys use it as a kind of ski slope. People walk past it this morning, oblivious to its strangeness. Maybe they're bored by its strangeness? Has it ever reminded any of them of this image?

Salvador Dali's dream sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's film Spellbound. A slope like a roof or alp. Another running person. Similar pearly white light.

There was once a fountain here, but it has long stopped spraying.

9 I go a bit closer. This place also reminds me of this mountain, Arthur's Seat, in Edinburgh, where I live. But then I realise what the place really reminds me of. The great pyramid of Giza

Its stones have been plundered too. Ancient visitors grafittied it too. It was a burial chamber of course, built to tell heaven and earth that the pharaoh who lay within was a guy who would live forever.

10

And surprise surprise. This is a place to venerate a dead leader too. Enver Hoxha had it built to house his worldly possessions. It was designed by his architect daughter and son-in-law. It was supposed to be a sacred place, a forever place. Even Enver's tooth brush was on display here.

11

It was covered in tiles, but after communism was overthrown here, the tiles were stripped away, like the marble on the pyramid of Giza was stripped away.

I'd love to go in it.

All this smashing and graffiti has been done in anger, to detox the place.

12 Enver tried to make something so permanent, and control its meaning. This building was to say "hail Enver". Now it says hate Enver.

In the end even strong men, autocrats, dictators can't control what things mean. So many of them build big monuments or skyscrapers to themselves. Phallic symbols. But as I look at this, I remember a joke by filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci: if new York is the bag apple, he said, Los Angeles is the big nipple. Enver's building, which I'm sure he wanted to be so so male, is a big nipple.

13 I go round its side.

wildflowers have seeded themselves in the building.

As the great Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay often said, the roots of the smallest wildflowers will gradually break open and destroy monuments of marble. The present order is the disorder of the future.

Finlay said that a wildflower is “A Mean Term between Virtue and Revolution”

What would old Enver think of that fruity phrase?

And again I love that Enver’s plans for posterity have been so undermined.

Enver’s mausoleum is now a children’s ski-slope, a graffiti wall, a nipple, a wildflower garden.

That’s how symbols work, sometimes. They’re intended to mean one thing but that meaning slips and slides, + is requisitioned by kids and flowers.

I walk back to have breakfast. It’s only 8am. I see my anti-Enver dog again. **210953.**

We have a good old stare at each other, then she and her pal walk off, and

so do I, to meet my pal Thomas.

Thomas and I get in a taxi. He tells me that Ismael Kadare, Albania's nobel nominated writer, wrote a novel called The Pyramid.

And Thomas tells me that Tirana council is planning to tear the pyramid down and build a new parliament based on the German one. . To erase the memory of Enver maybe. But isn't white-washing history what dictators do? In the coming days I meet 2 Albanian architects and ask them what the best modern building is in town. Both say, without hesitation, the pyramid.

We're heading to the Marubi film school now, to show one of my films. I was desperate to go there because I saw this Albanian film, Not a Carwash.

film professors and students protest when the police try to evict them because people want to make money off the land.

Gentian Koci directed the film. it should be shown in every film school in the world.

Towards the end of the film, workers demolish the film school's outdoor screen.

The students stage a peaceful protest. Not a Carwash is one of the best films I've seen about fighting for culture.

We arrive at Marubi and look what I find.

The screen has been re-erected

After my screening and discussion with the film students, we go a block away to the Albanian film archive. This is the main reason for my trip, to see the archive which is facing major problems.

Eriona Vyshka, Head of Collection and Cataloguing at the film archive, shows us the lovely books of casting photographs that the archive holds.

The archive is Albania's memory bank. Neatly filed away are still and moving images which quietly yell the story of Albania's last 100 years, its performers and politicians.

These are original stills of Enver Hoxha.

And then his wife

And the original hand written score for The Second November, which was

made in 1982, 3 yrs before the death of Hoxha.

It was recently restored by Colorlab Film Corp and The Albanian Cinema Project, a group of activists led by Regina Longo and the Albanian Film Archive.

For decades The Second November, looked like this: dark, shadowy, a films in blacks and greys.

But look at it now.

The chemical baths in which films were printed in Albania in the 80s were often depleted, so directors and cinematographers were never certain how bright their finished film would look, or how colourful...

This is a triumph I think.

We go downstairs to the archive's film vault and see why such restoration is needed.

This lady brings me a face mask, because the place smells of vinegar. Eriona leads the way. I go in.

Eriona shows me the negative storage area for documentaries.

I see three cooling fans on the wall. The three fans on the other side of the room haven't worked in years.

Last summer all the fans stopped. The temperature rose, till it was as hot as outdoors. Maybe hotter. Over the winter, the rain caused the upstairs ceiling to collapse.

Mould started to grow on the walls of the vaults. I see this kind of damp at floor level. Such damp and mould gets into the film cans. The negatives and prints start to decay, and smell of vinegar. Hence my mask. The staff and archivists have been doing the best they can, but I see this. Fungus growing a centimetre out of the wall. Eriona gives me permission to film it.

They don't try to hide it. They need help. Iris and Thomas have an additional fear. Some people in Albania would be happy if these images, reminders of a painful and shameful time, were not rescued at all and disappeared forever. Yet Albanian's greatest films, plus lots of other film prints from around the world, are in these rooms. I've been in film archives all around the world. But this is pretty awful.

I go back to my hotel, depressed.

Next morning, I go back to the pyramid. and climb it. yesterday I asked Genti, who made Not a Carwash, if he thought people ever had sex up

there. He says “of course”.

There is it, the big nipple.

Ismael Kadare wrote in his novel The Pyramid:

A time came when the confusion about the pyramids became so great that people wondered if they ever really existed. They were alleged to be phantoms, collective hallucinations, mirages that would simply vanish into thin air one fine day. Some people went in for an even subtler analysis, saying that the pyramids, though they did exist as such, reflected the wrong image of themselves, for there was always something missing or something extraneous in what could be known about them....more and more often the pyramids seemed to be turning themselves into insubstantial objects made of air. That was now such a frequent impression that many people acquired the habit of looking towards the horizon each morning on waking, apparently uncertain that things would still be there.

...the emotions that the pyramids aroused in men were cyclical. Admiration turned to indifference, hatred, destructive fury.

I love it up here.

Here's my favourite image so far.

The graffito says “When you look me in the eyes, I Catch a glimpse of heaven”.

This building’s decaying. And some of the films in the archive are decaying. I feel like someone’s built a huge pyramid of film prints and I’ve climbed to the top of them and I’m looking across Albania’s history. It’s memory. Its youth climbing a hill. What a climb it’s been.

I look out at the skyline of Tirana and notice what’s missing.

For a city in the Balkans, in a region so fought-over by religions, there’s hardly a minaret or church spire to be seen. The communists made Albania the world’s first atheist state.

The politicians said “the only religion is Albania is Albanianism.” I can see only this one distant minaret.

So I decide to go to it. It’s the mosque of Ethem Beu, built in the late 1700s.

I stand in its shadow. History casts its shadows here. The pashas, The communists (as this nice chunk of socialist architecture, the national museum, shows), The Palace of Culture, started by the Soviets then finished by the Chinese. It replaced the old Bazaar that stood on this site. And now, consumer capitalism in all its morning glory...

...which is probably what’s building this weetabix which, touchingly, curves

around protects this wee temple, the cemetery memorial of Kapllan Pasha. Memory as something built around, body swerved.

I go over to the Socialist museum and look up at its beautiful mosaic. A woman at the centre. The star in the red flag was removed in the 90s.

Thomas and Iris tell me that people always hope to find a fallen piece of the mosaic here. I do find a piece. I also have, as a souvenir, a bit of broken glass from Enver's pyramid.

Thomas takes me to see these deities – stalin, Lenin and their acolytes – who stand behind the art gallery because, like the pyramid, people aren't quite sure what to do with them. (Though judging by this...a wee string around Lenin's neck, someone has had a thought...)

For the rest of the day I go to see films. I'm here on a jury to see every fiction feature made in Albania in the last 5 years.

On the way home, exhausted, with a headful of images, I see one more that I like:

At 11pm I have to go on Tv for an hour and talk, with Iris and the director of the Festival of Albanian cinema, about restoring films - movies as heritage.

Next morning

Early start. I go through Mother Teresa square again. Outside the uni, I plonk my camera down and spot this bride in the distance. Her friends carry her dress. Well into the twentieth century, many Albanian brides' dowries included a single bullet to kill her if it was discovered that she wasn't a virgin. Marriages were arranged.

Who stopped this? Enver and his gang. They banned underage marriage and took away the guns so that brides couldn't be shot. In his own inimitable style, Enver wrote "The entire party and country should hurl into the fire and break the neck of anyone who tramples under foot the sacred law of the Party in defence of the rights of women and girls."

This, in its over-stated way, is projection in the way that Hazlitt talked about projection. A revolution re-describing the world. Women cut their hair and went to work.

Is that why many of the people crying when he died were women?

What did Mother Teresa think of such feminism? She finally visited Albania in 1988. Enver's widow took her to his grave. On live television, Mother Teresa embarrassed Madame Enver by handing her a rosary.

I watch Albanian films all day then, at night, I go to the opening of the festival on whose jury I am.

The opening film is Viktor Gjika's The Second November, from 1982. The first Albanian film to be restored. Rescued from the threat of mildew.

A Lazarus film. Lots of us speak beforehand, about movies as the memory of a country. But what if your past is traumatic? Is it best to forget it? Doesn't recovery involve forgetting?

No. Not forgetting, but removing the sting, the swelling, the pus. History can't be selectively cleaned up. It has to be there, for ever, an open book, a public pyramid.

Next morning I go to this place.

A dandified villa of death. The former Italian embassy, where people were tortured by the communists.

In today's paper, I read that a hunger striker, Lirak Bejko, died yesterday. Bejko had been persecuted by the communists in a place like this. An Albanian law promised former prisoners like him 11.5 Euros for every day they'd been in prison. But this money wasn't paid in full and so, 3 weeks ago, Bejko set fire to himself in protest. Then he went on hunger strike.

The building's on George W Bush Street. He means something different

here too. He supported independence for the predominantly Albanian Kosovo. So when he visited Tirana in 2007 he was given a rock star welcome. The oar and the winnowing fan.

Bridge

I walk and see walls of death notices. And the Albanian flag, with its two-headed eagle, is everywhere. It's exactly 100 years since the birth of the Albanian independent nation, as depicted in the film The Second November..

Then I watch 3 more Albanian films

Next morning...

...filmmaker Genti takes me driving. I said that I'd like to go to the non-fancy bits of town.

We look.

-

The boy in blue is called Elvis, the smaller one in white is Ervis, the one in

black is Roland. And the lively one in red is Edi.

The young man in grey is Mirsam. During Enver's time, babies could not be given Christian or Muslim names. So some young men were called Marenglen, After Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Look at these children, filmed on the day that Enver Hoxha died. They can't be crying because they'll miss their communist leader. More, perhaps, because people around them are crying. They can sense the drama of the day.

I get more of a sense of this city. There are ancient towns in Albania, but Tirana's relatively new. In the 40s, someone called it a boulevard without a city. Its population jumped from 200,000 when Hoxha died to a million people now. A third of the entire population. It's moved so fast that land for grazing sheep, for example, has been surrounded, as if a tide has suddenly come in. This man says that this is one of the last places in town where he can feed his sheep.

For more than a century, Albanians have been on the move. They started to come here in large numbers in the 1920s.

It's a walking place. When Krushev came here, he walked on a carpet of flowers.

Enver later called him “the greatest counter-revolutionary charlatan and clown the world has ever known.”

And from 1950-1955, 190,000 illiterate people were taught to read.

But then came the break with the Soviet Union. After which Enver made a speech to say that, in order to remain separate from the revisionist communists in Moscow, the Albanian people should be prepared to eat grass...

After that came the Maoist years. The people cheered

The Chinese came because there was chrome here, and limestone and nickel silicate and copper and coal. Sounds familiar.

By 1980s, Enver's last years, most of the 3 million population were below the poverty line. Albanians didn't have to eat grass, but in the 80s people began to stand in never-ending food lines. There were electricity cuts and then the terror welled up again.

And after he died? Relief and euphoria. But hard on their heels came

anarchy. Inflation hit an unbelievable 260 % per month.

Poverty was extreme. Food and water were scarce.

In 1991, 800,000 of the 3 million people who lived in Albania fled.

The country got a bit empty. More Albanians now live outside its borders than inside.

And a few years later, a large proportion of the population lost its savings in pyramid selling schemes. Pyramids again.

Dear Enver Hoxha

I'm standing on the outskirts of Tirana, watching a green Mercedes drive away from me. It's the year 2012. 27 years after your death. I've been in your country for just 3 days now. I've been looking at it and trying to learn.

Like you, I think that revolutions were and are needed because of what the write Hazlitt calls the "intolerable abuses of history". Like you, I'm not religious. Like you, I know that equality for women is a basic right. Like you, I think that poor people are usually exploited by rich people.

So you might think that I'm here in Tirana to praise you, Enver, like so many praised you. You might think that I'm here to visit the monumental statue of you in the centre of the city, or even to pay my respects to your

collected possessions in the great pyramid that your daughter built for you.

Well, you'd be wrong to think these things. When you went away you left a puddle, Enver. A mucky mess. More than a quarter of your people fled Albania in the years after you died. Communism fell apart in the Soviet block in 1989, and in Albania in 1991. They pulled down the huge statue of you soon afterwards. I think your head fell off. This was all filmed and is now on something called youtube, so the whole world can see it.

And the pyramid that you had built as your mausoleum? Your body lies in an ordinary grave now. The pyramid became a disco, and people ripped the tiles from it, and they shit on it now, Enver, or have sex on it. It's the opposite of what you intended. It's a place to play or fuck or shit. Are you red-faced Enver? You should be.

Everything's been privatised in Albania, Enver, and your long suffering people suffered again in the 1990s because of a stupid pyramid selling scheme. Just yesterday someone killed themselves in protest at the fact that the compensation he'd been promised because he was tortured by your henchmen, has still not been paid. So the dying in your name continues.

Why did your people do these things? Why do they feel these things? Because of the wounds you left, Enver. I'm only beginning to understand these wounds, but here's a poem by one of your countrymen, Ferdinand Laholli, who was born in 1960 in a labour camp, just before you broke with the Soviet union. He spent decades growing up in internment camps:

Prick up your ears, Enver. It's gonna hurt.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

(1994)

Under the terrible dictatorship,
we knew we had no freedom
to speak or to publish,
and we thought
we had freedom of thought
and imagination.

We could eat and drink frugally, quietly,
be quietly proud of our frugal lives,
and think ourselves modestly
self-sufficient.

We did with so little for so long
that we thought we could do anything
with nothing.

Today we realise that our imaginations
were stringless kites.

Because of the dictatorship
we are poor and unwrought.

We don't know what to think
in a world of multiple pollutions and corruption,
where everything is bought
- even despised asceticism.

We have no faith in our truncated
sneered-at, jeered-at nation.

Those of us who dare to think
think secretly that there's no such thing
as freedom of thought.

There were no tourists before,
but now they come, under the new dispensation,
like old men's dribbles without let or hindrance,
not to admire the unravaged landscape but to pity
and savour our demoralisation.
I'm here like old men's dribbles, Enver.

How did the words "truncated, jeered at, sneered at nation" make you feel,
Enver? Sick inside? And the word "unwrought"?

Why am I telling you this Enver? To rain on your parade, that's why. To
make you spin in your grave, because you and your chums Stalin and Mao
ruined it for the rest of us. It was right to try to remove serfdom from the
world, but you and your cronies poisoned the plan with hubris, aggression,
paranoia, narcissism, greed and double-thinking.

Why did you do this Enver? You started off right. Did years of power and
privilege make you forget the lives of others? Did you come to feel that you
were bigger than life? When you had a thought about your country or its
people, did it never occur to you that you might be wrong? Or when you
had such a thought were you so distracted by the throb of power, the
tumescence of being on the world stage and adored, on plinths and in the
dreams of your people, that it didn't occur to you to consult, or care?
When you went, Enver, other things came, and they muddled the waters
too. But despite you and them, the comings and goings, something
remained fixed, like a stare, like people-watching. I've seen it and felt it on

these last few days. The Albanian people, who are no longer your people, still have their traditional welcome: Heart and bread and salt.

They live like this, another poem:

SADO-NGADO

ADVERBS

SHKATËRROJ I unravel, I destroy

Fatkeqësisht Unluckily

Rrëmbimthi Drivenly

Barkazi Crawlingly

Fshehtazi Secretly

Gjerësisht Lengthily

Majtazi On the left

Djathtazi On the right

Me të eger Wildly

Kalimthi In passing

Dita-ditës Day by day

Parreshtur Non-stop

Nga viti në vit From year to year

Paqençe Undoglike

Ngado Anywhere

Sado No matter how

-

My rant at Hoxha's over... and Genti and I drive on into the hills, towards the dark sky. And we find ourselves behind the green Mercedes that we saw in the last scene.

That night I get a message that I have be on TV the morning.

So I get up. It's my second-last day in Albania.

And where's the TV station?

Inside here.

I'm excited, and go inside.

And we talk on breakfast telly about Albanian movies and, in particular, how Albanians are portrayed in Mainstream films. People here hated the Liam Neeson film Taken 2, because the Albanian baddies are so naff, so underimagined. The TV presenters ask me why the baddies're like this. I say I dunno, except that filmmakers, like most people in the world, like me a few days ago, know little about Albania. Which is why making movies here matters.

This is Iris.

And then I go to this conference.

In which speakers articulate what I've been trying to think about in these last few days.

One speaker says this: Memory is the only way of overcoming division.
But is that true?

Where I come from, Northern Ireland, Memory keeps division alive. The people are very alike in terms of class and humour, friendliness and sarcasm. But then they remember some old battle or skirmish and suddenly each looks to the other, like the enemy. I like the forgetting of the pyramid, the forgetting of my anti-enver dog, the forgetting of the kids who don't want to be politicians.

... but if I really didn't care for memory then I wouldn't care about the decaying film prints or the threat to demolish the pyramid.

Before I can really get to think this through, a group of us head off in jeeps. We're going to the hills, with the army. I sit next to an army guy, who speaks perfect English.

We're with the army because they oversee the old concrete bunkers of the communist era. There are 350,000 of them. Many look like mushrooms, but the ones that we're going to are massive, and buried up in the hills.

We pass a village called Sorrel Tunnel and stop, get out, and see this. Another landscape painting. The white things in the distance are the bunkers we've come here to visit.

Why have we come to see them? Because
...one possible solution to the overheating and damp of the film archive
is...to rehouse it in the old bunkers.

A bit of a brain wave. We're excited and nervous.

We begin to walk there. Leopardskin shoes again. They belong to Regina
Longo, film historian at the University of California Santa Cruz. The guy
with the shaved head is Fatmir Coci, the great Albanian film director.
Fatmir's name means luck. We hope we'll have some today.

The guy on the phone is my American-albanian friend Thomas. The
woman in grey is Eriona, the head of the archive collections. This guy with
the bag is an Albanian architect, who has written a book about the bunkers.
This guy with the hat is a French filmmaker who's documenting the archive
project.

In the distance on the right, another army guy meets us.

Our first glimpse of the bunkers. Et in arcadia ego. Like a Poussin
painting.

Landmines lie about the place.

We've to wait for the keys to the bunkers.

Just as a pyramid can turn into a disco or a kids play slope or a TV station, so a safety bunker might turn into an alladin's cave of film. what an imaginative re-use of history. Politics becoming art.

I love this thought but then suddenly think of a less lovely one. If I kind of like the fact that wildflowers have seeded themselves in the pyramid, why don't I like the fact that fungus is growing in the film archive? The fungus is like the flowers. The present order is the disorder of the future in the archive too.

I'm a bit shocked by this thought but, before, I can think it through, the army opens one of the bunkers, and we go in.

It's huge. The experts look around.

They take photos and measurements. Later I hear that they're hopeful that one of these bunkers will work as a film archive. It's too early to celebrate, but I'm excited.

My story of Albania is the story of a place that changes.

I leave, and see a fossil that Iris had found earlier, sitting on the window sill of the bunker. How about that for leaving its mark. This is forever.

Fatmir drives us down the hill and we see this and I film it. None of us knows what it is, but we look for a bit and the sun comes out. And then I go to see more movies.

Genti takes me driving again. We're looking again. Thomas and Iris told me about an Albanian director called Xhanfise Keko. I can't get her name out of my *head*. Xhanfise Keko, Xhanfise Keko. Here's a bit of her 1977 film, Tomka and his friends. About Albanian boys during WW2.

They see Germans arrive but refuse to let them take over their football pitch.

Real play. Long lens so the camera doesn't interfere with the play. Short shots. Keko wasn't afraid of imagery that was a bit out of focus.

In this great sequence in Keko's film, the boys sing and dance to drown out the sound of the Nazis

The moral seriousness of the kids reminds me of the great Italian film *The Bicycle Thieves*.

The wee boy at the front plays an imaginary violin. Did Keko ask him to do that? She was clearly great at looking.

Tomka and his friends was a big hit. Keko directed 29 films between 1949 and 1984.

In 1974 she released this one, *The Newest City in the World*. A boy, Fatmir, falls asleep and dreams that he builds a new city. Keko has the dream photographed in hand held shots, wide angle lens. A construction site

becomes an adventure playground. No synch sound, just the tinkle of music. And then, somehow, a steamroller does the boy's bidding...and the smoke of fairy tales, and magic trees.

Under communism, films were supposed to be realistic; Keko breaks away from realism, into a field of dreams, tenderness and fantasy.

She was clearly a great director, but appears in almost no film histories. Yet look.

She's so famous in Albania that there's a street named after her.
A big street

013809 kids play on xhanfize keko street. With the softest football in the world. Older versions of them play cards. And people watch. When we watch kids do we feel young like them or old because we aren't like them? We remember. this is a memory image.

And so is this. What does this old guy remember? Did he see kruschev? Did he cheer for mao? Did he weep for Enver? In recent years he's seen Albania become one big market.

There are precious few parks that haven't been paved over like this one.

Xhanfise Keko worked within the communist system. Documentary filmmaker Viktor Stratoberdha didn't. This is one of three groundbreaking short films that he made.

He shows real poverty, an ordinary house, tatty clothes. A boy walks on his heels. Beautiful silhouettes. This was a far cry from the propagandist films of communism.

How did Victor get away with such truth, such visual poetry? These scenes were from an unfinished film 'We Laugh Because We Cannot Cry'.

Stratoberdha said he was trying to show Albanians how not to live. Don't leave water running in your apartment. Don't all cram on the bus at once.

But he shows the life of Albania's poor in stark, neo-realist compositions.

Viktor was perhaps the most innovative Albanian filmmaker ever, so its shock that he only made films for 13 months, in 1955 and 56.

He was denounced for telling a joke about Enver. In a theatre play in 1967, he placed Enver's latest five year plan in a coffin. For this, he was imprisoned for 20 years.

Three years after Hoxha's death, Viktor was freed. He made it to Greece, where he painted houses to survive. Before he died, he wrote to the man in Albania who denounced him for the joke about Enver, asking only for a simple apology. Instead, the man sent him a reference book he'd recently written about... Albanian film.

Next day, my last day in Albania, it's raining in my Monet painting.

05-09-2012 Iris and Thomas tell me they've a surprise to me. We go to the National Gallery of Arts. For the first time in 60 years, the greatest Albanian icon paintings from the 1400s onwards are being exhibited together.

I look at them in close up. I have to film these. Thanks to the National Gallery of Arts, I get to:

005129 This is St theodore Tironi, and in a moment we'll see st Theodore Stateletes. Tironi was an ordinary footsoldier, whereas Stateletes was an aristocrat. So this icon is about class. It was painted by Onufri, the greatest of the icon artists, in the early 15 hundreds. He was famous for his realism and for introducing the colour pink into icons. These faces are 500 years old. The cracked and damaged surface of this picture reminds me of the damaged wall of the film archive and the outer walls of the pyramid.

And here's john the Baptist, also by onufri. John the revolutionary. He looks not at us, but to another world, a more sacred one, and we, the sinners, follow his thoughts to that world. tiny lips and an attenuated nose – the rarified influence of byzantine art. And those triangles on his temples and patterns on his skin show that he's not flesh and blood. He's something more abstract. And here's onufri's famous, gorgeous colour scheme.

And wow, here's another onufri. Christ the Pantokrator. The silver frame has grown to cover much of the picture surface. The same attenuation as

the Baptist, but more solemn. And the eyes are closer to meeting ours, like the eye-lines in the films of Yazujiro Ozu...but they're still looking elsewhere, to another, better, future world.

And here's his mother. Those Ozu eyes again, and those tiny lips, and top lighting, like moonlighting. Candles have burnt in front of this image for 5 centuries and yet look how clean and clear her skin is. I blink before she does.

CUT THIS NEXT SECTION: Suddenly I think of the films I've been seeing.

The icons I've just seen are precious. We're glad they've been preserved because they're beautiful in themselves and because they tell us things about theology, social class, philosophy, colour and the aesthetics of their times. Looking at them, I realise that movies are the icons of our time. They're precious and they should be preserved too. Not just the films whose ideas we currently approve of, but all films.

It's time to head for the airport.

I see guys who've cut down branches of trees...

...and somehow my mind imagines that the trees are the wildflowers in the bunker or the fungus in the archive.

The trees have to be pruned to keep them from growing across the road.
Do wildflowers need to be killed to stop them ruining historic buildings?
Rome...

...would be ruined if wildflowers went wild in it.

And what if this fungus went wild?

Here's a film in which it has begun to grow. This needs to be stopped of course.

We drive on to the airport. All my looking over the last few days has made me see a bit more detail.

I glimpse this person and wonder who they are. What they're doing outstanding in that field. I imagine that it's Xhanfize Keko. That she didn't die in 2007.

My eye's caught by the thing in the bottom right of this image. It looks like a film can. Or maybe a bunker.

I should jump out of the car and tell Xhanfise that I want to do a retrospective of her films, around the world.

But then she's gone.

My first flight on the way home is headed for Rome.

I see the curve of Albania. We cross the Adriatic.

My mind starts to wander.

I think of this incredible moment in Theo Angelopoulous' Greek film Eternity and a Day. The camera tracks left and cranes, like in a Hollywood musical, to show the Greek border with Albania. People are climbing the fence, but they like they're crucified. What an image of the desperation to leave Albania, the pain of leaving Albania.

As I leave Albania, my mind wanders more.

The icons i saw are precious. We're glad they've been preserved because they're beautiful in themselves and because they tell us things about theology, social class, philosophy, colour and the aesthetics of their times. Thinking of them, I realise that movies are the icons of our time. They're precious and they should be preserved too. DELETE: Not just the films whose ideas we currently approve of, but all films.

I open my Hazlitt book. There's a bit on the right wing essayist Edmund Burke, writing about the revolutionary rulers of France:

He wrote of them: "here end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the

equality and rights of men. In the Serbonian bog of this base oligarchy they are all absorbed, sunk, lost forever.”

What a load of crap. Equality isn't a deceitful dream. Not even Enver's corruption of it made it that.

Burke's phrase Serbonian bog comes from Milton and Dante:

“At certain revolutions all the damned
Are brought: and feel by turns the bitter change
Of fierce extremes...”

The bitter change of fierce extremes. That's what I've seen these last few days when I've looked at lovely Albania.

A week ago I had almost no images in my head of Albania. Now I have all these.

A pyramid, kids, films, a dictator, an archive, bunkers, icons, wildflowers. Art and politics.

This is only my truth, of course. My first Albania. I hope I'll have more Albanias.

Thomas tells me of the hundreds of clippings and articles he's collected about Albania. One tells a story from 1962. A French journalist was swimming in the crystal blue waters of the Adriatic. Under the gaze of security, a beautiful Albanian woman paddled close to him, only for a

moment. She said, 'There's so much I would like to tell you about my country. But it's impossible. I cannot.'

Then she swam away and Albania closed up again.

I change planes at Rome airport.

Despite the fact that lots of what I've seen has been about a trauma, a wound, the going and looking has been joyful. I've loved going and looking, and meeting people. I've seen that even things made of concrete change. The Edinburgh writer Robert Louis Stephenson once used the phrase "a 1000 coloured pictures to the eye." I now have a thousand coloured pictures of Albania.

None of them are dragons.

Edinburgh leafy