ALBANOFUTURISM AND STAR DEATH

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Abstract

This essay provides an analysis of a number of Albanian Socialist Realist science fiction works in the context of Albania's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist policies from the 1960s onward. As a "minor" literature, Albanian Socialist Realist science fiction was able to trace out the complexities and futures of Albanian ideological doctrine in relative freedom. Tracing out affinities with Afrofuturist literature, I propose "Albanofuturism" as an overarching conceptual term for Albanian science fiction works that openly engage with these thematics, both during the socialist period and after. Finally, the essay introduces the figure of "star death" as emblematic for Albanofuturist considerations not only with regard to the resonances between anti-colonial, anti-imperialist politics and science fiction, but also their possible failure and collapse.

Keywords: *science fiction, Albanian literature, Socialist Realism, Afrofuturism, literary criticism*

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Albanofuturizmi dhe vdekja e yjeve

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Abstrakt

Kjo ese sjell analizën e disa veprave të letërsisë fantastiko-shkencore shqiptare të realizmit socialist në kontekstin e politikave anti-koloniale dhe anti-imperialiste të Shqipërisë nga vitet ’60 e në vijim. Si një zhanër “minor”, letërsia fantastiko-shkencore shqiptare e realizmit socialist ishte në gjendje të shqyrtonte ndërlikimet dhe trajektoret e doktrinës ideologjike shqiptare me njëfarë lirie. Duke përvijuar ngjashmëritë me letërsinë afrofuturiste, autori propozon termin “albanofuturizëm” si një koncept të përgjithshëm për veprat shqiptare të letërsisë fantastiko-shkencore që i trajtojnë hapur këto tematika, si gjatë periudhës socialiste, ashtu edhe pas saj. Së fundi, eseja prezanton konceptin e “vdekjes së yjeve” si emblemë të përsiatjeve albanofuturiste, jo vetëm në lidhje me rezonancat midis politikave anti-koloniale e anti-imperialiste me letërsinë fantastiko-shkencore, por edhe për mundësinë e dështimit dhe të shembjes të tyre.

Fjalë kyçe: *letërsi fantastiko-shkencore, letërsi shqiptare, realizëm socialist, afrofuturizmi, kritikë letrare*

I. INTRODUCTION

After breaking consecutively with Tito’s Yugoslavia in 1948 and the post-Stalinist Soviet Union in 1960, moving into the

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ambit of Mao's People's Republic of China,[3] Albania developed a political ideology that recast it as a vanguard of the communist revolution, increasingly aligning itself with anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggles in the Third World, becoming, as Elidor Mëhilli phrases it, a "laboratory for transnational collaboration and confrontation".[4] Even though its international policies were isolationist and strongly attached to a somewhat paralyzing doctrine of national sovereignty,[5] the country itself was not particularly isolated.[6] At the Fifth Congress of the Party of Labor of Albania (*Partia e Punës e Shqipërisë*) in November 1966, communist leader Enver Hoxha aligned with the Chinese Communist Party and all Marxist–Leninist parties in the world to combat imperialism, inaugurating a period of frequent interactions with Third World[7] revolutionary movements lasting

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[3] The work of Ylber Marku is indispensable for understanding the precise dynamics of these developments in Albania's foreign relations and alliances. See Ylber Marku, "Shifting Alliances: Albania in the Early Cold War", *Journal of Cold War Studies* vol. 24, no. 3, 2022, pp. 80–115; Ylber Marku, "Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of Soviet-Albanian Relations, and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960-1961", *The International History Review* vol. 42, no. 4, 2020, pp. 813–832; and Ylber Marku, "China and Albania: the Cultural Revolution and Cold War Relations", *Cold War History* vol. 17, no. 4, 2017, pp. 367–383. See, for a broad overview, also Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

[4] Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao*, p. 4.

[5] Klejd Këlliçi, "Albania and Libya: A Distant Cold War Relationship", *Remembrance and Justice* vol. 41, no. 1, 2023, pp. 149–165 (p. 152).

[6] As also suggested in ibid., p. 150.

[7] I use "Third World" here strictly as a geopolitical term for the set of countries that was neither firmly aligned with the US and its capitalist allies nor the USSR and its communist allies.

into the 1980s. Apart from the propaganda channels of Radio Tirana, which transmitted the Albanian political position in twenty different languages, and the publishing house *8 Nëntori*, which disseminated the translated writings of Enver Hoxha,[8] the Albanian government also started to organize political and military courses for foreign Marxist–Leninist cadres. Additionally, from 1964 until 1976, annual financial support was disbursed to Marxist–Leninist organizations from all over the world, mainly through funds provided by the Chinese government.[9]

In 1964, Albania started with providing financial assistance to the then recently established Comité National de Libération of future Congolese president Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and in 1966, eight cadres were trained at the naval base in Vlora, the first of such groups to arrive in Albania.[10] Similar financial and operational support was extended to the Haitian Workers Party. The PLA particularly favored relations with those parties that had chosen to follow its pro-China course against the "revisionist" Soviet Union, such as the Communist Party of Brazil and split-offs such as the Communist Party of Bolivia (Marxist-Leninist), the Revolutionary Communist Party of Chile, the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Ecuador, and the Sudanese

[8] Ylli Molla, *Guerilas Made in Albania: Historia e Arafatit, Kabilës, Lulës, Amazonas dhe luftëtarëve nga 11 shtete, që u përgatitën politikisht dhe ushtarakisht nga pedagogët shqiptarë*, Tirana: Botart, 2016, p. 11.

[9] Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao*, p. 218; Molla, *Guerilas Made in Albania*, pp. 112–52 gives some sense of the budgets involved.

[10] See for an extensive, if somewhat unstructured, overview of groups financed by Albania during this period see Molla, *Guerilas Made in Albania*.

Communist Party – Revolutionary Leadership. From 1967 onward cadres from all these parties received political and military training in Albania. In the case of the Communist Party of Indonesia, once the largest non-ruling communist party in the world, Albania provided refuge to cadres fleeing from persecution and mass killings by the CIA-sponsored military regime during 1965 and 1966.[11] In the early 1970s, aid extended to training cadres from Spain fighting against the fascist Franco dictatorship, as well as Yasser Arafat's Al-Fatah Party and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which considered Albania "a base of revolution and [its] home".[12]

In a recent discussion, Raino Isto argues that it is precisely in this period, in which the Albanian ideological project is redefined to include solidarity with anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles in Third World countries, that Albanian Socialist Realist art appears.[13] Based on a detailed analysis of

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[11] Molla, *Guerilas Made in Albania*, pp. 87–88, 194. On the anti-communist and anti-Chinese persecution in Indonesia, see, for example, Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

[12] See Klejd Këlliçi, "The PLO and Communist Albania: Cold War Relations", *Journal of Palestine Studies* vol. 50, no. 4. 2021, pp. 53–66 (p. 56), for an extensive overview. Këlliçi argues that precisely their adherence to the nation state as concept convinced Albania to support el-Fatah and PLO over other Palestinian parties that would be more ideologically aligned with the PLA.

[13] Raino Isto, "A Different Narrative of Nonalignment? The Case of Socialist Albania in the Art History and Geography of East-Central Europe", in *Plural and Multiple Geographies of Modern and Contemporary Art in East-Central Europe*, ed. Caterina Preda and Magdalena Radomska, London: Routledge, 2024, pp. 224–240.

Albania's cultural production, he concludes that Albania's purported isolationism might equally be read as "the most 'universal' iteration of socialism possible, insofar as it appeared to eschew both all national specificities and all capitulations with colonialism, imperialism, or revisionism".[14] Following Bojana Videkanić's work on nonaligned modernism,[15] Isto provocatively places Albanian Socialist Realist cultural production in the same tradition, including its entanglement with postcolonial and anti-imperialist struggles, predicated on the Albanian experiences of interbellum colonization by fascist Italy and subsequent anti-fascist Partisan warfare during the Antifascist National Liberation War (1942–1944).[16]

As a result, Isto argues, Albania's particular brand of Socialist Realism did not merely reflect the universal aspirations of socialism, but attempted to construct "an alternative cultural canon and geography […] premised on revolutionary struggle and anti-imperialist values".[17] In particular, Isto locates the universalism of Albania's cultural nonalignment, i.e., its belonging to neither the imperialist West nor de-Stalinized Soviet Union – and despite its carefully maintained, suspicious distance from the official Non-Aligned Movement – in "minor" works of art and cultural production, works that were allowed to place less

[14] Ibid., p. 226.

[15] Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945-1985*, Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2020.

[16] The official term used to describe the partisan resistance against fascist occupation during World War II.

[17] Isto, "A Different Narrative of Nonalignment?", p. 231.

emphasis on the nationalist socialist state-building narrative and had more freedom to "navigate positions of solidarity and stances of militant critique".[18] In this article I will argue that the Albanian literary equivalent of the minor cultural production discussed by Isto in the visual arts is indeed its science fiction production, the genre that Enis Sulstarova has dubbed a "subset of children's literature".[19]

II. ELEVATING KINSHIP

Let me start by providing three examples that operate precisely at the intersection of the exploration of ideological kinships and common science fiction tropes such as future technologies and space travel. Thanas Qerama's story "Katastrofa e ashensorit qiellor" ("The Catastrophe of the Space Elevator"),[20] set in the year 2000, explores themes of racism, capitalist exploitation, the threat of nuclear arms, and imperialism. The story features Poni Tutaki, a young scientist born in a small African village built exactly on the equator. Excelling in math and physics, he receives a good education due to the support of a teacher, but leaves his home country to pursue

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[18] Ibid., p. 228.

[19] Enis Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State: Albanian Science Fiction Literature During Communism", *dějiny–teorie–kritika* no. 1, 2022, pp. 91–112 (p. 97). The determination which Albanian Socialist Realist science fiction literature was explicitly aimed at children and which was written for an adult audience is immaterial to my argument. Rather, the fact that it is described as "children's literature" signals precisely its "minor" status.

[20] Thanas Qerama, "Katastrofa e ashensorit qiellor", in *Roboti i pabindur*, Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1981, pp. 102–137 (p. 137).

his dreams in the West. He eventually finds a low-level job at a nuclear arms institute[21] and reads his way through the library. Despite being faced with omnipresent racism, he passes difficult oral examinations, but hardly receives a meaningful promotion and the institute fully exploits his intellectual labor and ideas. Poni himself finds pleasure in his work, and looks the other way when his scientific results are published by his white supervising professor as his own. He develops a space elevator, and the idea is quickly appropriated by the professor as well. Planning to build his space elevator in his hometown as a tribute, Poni immediately discovers upon his return that as a result his entire village has been forcibly displaced by the military. Shocked, his family disowns him: "go now, go, and serve those imperialists even better and… and it's better if you never showed yourself again", his father tells him.[22] And, tragically, so he does. When phase 1 of this construction project is completed, Poni finds himself at the top of the space elevator, a "golden negro"[23] surrounded by white billionaire tourists and a staff that loathes the color of his skin. He says to himself: "Even here, in the sky, they will implement racial segregation."[24] When Poni discovers that his invention will be used as a nuclear weapons installation rather

[21] The institute falls under the Ministry of War, led by a certain "Minister Bush". Qerama, ibid., p. 129.

[22] "Shko tani, shko, shërbeju edhe më mirë imperialistëve dhe… dhe është mirë të mos më dalësh më përpara syve" (ibid., p. 125).

[23] "zezaku i artë" (ibid., p. 133). The term "zezak" is still in use in Albanian to refer to someone with a Black skin, and can also be used pejoratively. As a result, I opted for the somewhat outdated translation "negro" rather than the more neutral "Black person".

[24] "Edhe këtu, në qiell, këta do ta bëjnë dallimin racial" (ibid., p. 128).

than to serve humanity as he had intended, he uses the occasion of a cosmic storm threatening to hit the space elevator to evacuate the structure and flee into the countryside, back to his people. The space elevator is destroyed.

Flamur Topi's story "Dashuria e robotëve" ("The Love of Robots") takes place in the context of a large, international robotics fair, dominated by a robot called Ditrob,[25] built by an inventor, Soni,[26] from one of the capitalist superpowers. Trained with all the knowledge of Western civilization, the robot quickly amasses enormous riches and finds himself at the center of a global media hype. Invited for a public interview, he quickly reveals the biases of his training: "What is the value of the flesh, bones, and blood of 10,000 negros compared to my electronic brain, S.D. 1250?" [27] Even though destined to win the competition of the fair, his road to victory is blocked by the appearance of a couple of robot lovers, Atalanta and Genti, designed by a collective of scientists headed by Ilir Arbër, from the "Land of the Sun", by all accounts modeled after Albania. Even though perhaps of a simpler mind, the love and affection that Atalanta and Genti show for each other drive Soni and Ditrob mad with jealousy, and Soni eventually goes as far as stealing Genti's heart, and implanting it into Ditrob to seduce Atalanta.

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[25] The name Ditrob is a portmanteau word containing the root *dituri* "knowledge" and *rob* from *robot*, but also *rob* "slave".

[26] Although Soni occurs as a proper name in Albania, it is also an Albanian rendering of the Japanese brand name Sony.

[27] "Ç'janë mishrat, koskat dhe gjaku i dhjetë mijë zezakëve vendas të marrë së bashku, përpara trurit tim elektronik S. D. 1250?" (Flamur Topi, "Dashuria e robotëve", in *Dashuria e robotëve*, Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1976, p. 69). Translation from Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 105.

Despite this plot's ultimate failure, Ditrob still wins the competition but is left profoundly unsatisfied, and so is his maker. After the competition, Soni accosts Ilir, trying to understand the secret of his robots' design. Ilir argues against him that even though his robots have feelings and sensibility, they will never be able to compete with humankind: "The convictions of Diti were your convictions. Unintentionally you expressed yourself like Diti when he claimed to have more rights than negroes, placing himself above humans…" [28] Criticism of techno-utopianism, capitalism, and racism thus go hand in hand.

And finally, in Vangjel Dilo's *Takim me yjorët e Adës* (*Meeting with the Astrals of Ada*), taking place in the fully colonized Milky Way of the 2240s, Albanian scientists assist the Academy of Arab States to move a water-rich asteroid into Earth's orbit to terraform the Sahara,[29] while they themselves are interested in moving the iron-rich asteroid Teuta into orbit for

[28] "Bindjet e Ditit ishin bindjet tuaja. Padashur u shprehët si Diti, kur pretendonte të kishte më shumë të drejta nga ç'kanë zezakët, duke e vënë veten mbi njerëzit…" (Topi, "Dashuria e robotëve", p. 98).

[29] Vangjel Dilo, *Takim me yjorët e Adës*, Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1988, p. 6. The recurring theme of irrigating the Sahara (see also Arion Hysenbegas, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1983, p. 19) might be related to the attempts of the Albanian government to establish foreign relations with several Middle Eastern countries in the same period. The broader idea of terraforming could possibly also be brought into a productive conversation with the effort of the Albanian government to drain the swamps near Maliq and its broader attempts to transform nature itself. See Artan R. Hoxha, *Sugarland: The Transformation of the Countryside in Communist Albania*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2023, and Dimitra Gkitsa, "Chimneys and Electric Wires Conquering the Sky: The Great Transformation of Nature in Socialist Albania", *ARTMargins* vol. 14, no. 2, 2025, pp. 84–103.

mining purposes. As the spaceship Shqiponja 2244 arrives at Teuta on a mission to redirect its orbit, the Albanian astronauts make first contact with an advanced alien species, which, it turns out, has populated its home world Ada in the constellation of Cygnus with plants, animals, and birds taken from Earth during a previous visit thousands of years earlier,[30] including thirty-six humans – from Africa.[31] In Dilo's novel, the aliens are thus literally Africans from a technologically advanced future.

In the only extant study of Albanian science fiction from its "golden age" during the 1970s and '80s, Enis Sulstarova's pioneering "The Future of a Stalinist State: Albanian Science Fiction Literature During Communism",[32] these affinities between Albanian science fiction literature and its anti-imperialist and anti-colonial engagement from that period are limited by a somewhat narrow theoretical approach. Relying mainly on Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as a dialectic between estrangement and cognition,[33] Sulstarova

[30] Dilo, *Takim me yjorët e Adës*, p. 93.

[31] Ibid., p. 118.

[32] Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State".

[33] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 7–8; Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 93, 95. Paul Kincaid's approach to leave science-fiction without definition but rather approach it as a set of Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" is more capacious and productive. Science fiction is "any number of things – a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist of time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective […] – which are braided together in an endless variety of combinations" (Paul Kincaid, "On the Origins of Genre", *Extrapolation* vol. 44, no. 4, 2003, pp. 409–419 [pp. 414, 416–417]). The question of the well-definedness of "genre" as such has of course already

interprets Albanian Socialist Realist science fiction literature as a rather straightforward confirmation of "timeless Stalinism",[34] reflecting "the fact that Stalinist Albania was one of the most isolated countries on the planet".[35] And this purported Stalinism, in short, limited the breadth of the estrangement, and thus the cognitive effect, that Albanian science fiction could provide.[36]

Sulstarova emphasizes the didactic function of science fiction literary production, whose "cognitive aspect" served "the expansion of information about physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and mathematics that was taught in schools"[37] and learning that "progress was unstoppable, cumulative, and limitless".[38] This stimulation of the imagination was provided by so-called *nova* (defined by Suvin as narratively dominant fictional novelties or innovations[39]), such as space elevators or interstellar travel. This somewhat narrow definition of a science fiction novel constrains the breadth of Sulstarova's analysis,

been contested much earlier, for example in Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre", trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* nr. 7, 1980, pp. 55–81.

[34] Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 111.

[35] Ibid., p. 91.

[36] In his introduction to the journal issue in which Sulstarova's article appears, Stanislav Holubec, replacing Stalinist teleology for a neoliberal one, goes even a step further: "Albanian sci-fi omitting all social and economic problems of a self-isolated country, and omitting the given geopolitical circumstances can thus be characterized as a culture of displacing an *inevitable future defeat*" (Stanislav Holubec, "Introduction: Imagining the Future as a Culture of Defeat – Eastern and Central European Imagined Futures since 1945", *dějiny–teorie–kritika*, no. 1, 2022, pp. 9–16 [p. 14]).

[37] Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 97.

[38] Ibid., p. 111.

[39] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 63.

despite his otherwise exhaustive overview and extensive knowledge of Albanian science fiction literature. Unfortunately, the limits imposed by his theoretical framework are mapped onto what he considers to be the limitations of the literary genre as a whole: "The horizon of the future was already known; therefore, the imagining of the future in science fiction works was structured in line with the reigning ideology."[40] For Sulstarova, the Stalinist-imposed isolation of the country goes hand in hand with the limitations of Albanian science fiction as a literary genre. But as I have shown above, the Albania of the 1970s and '80s was anything but politically isolated, which is equally brought to bear in the imagination presented in its science fiction literature.

III. TRACES OF ALBANOFUTURISM

In his study *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder calls our attention to the co-emergence of science fiction as a literary genre and the expansion of Western colonialism.[41] Rieder takes as his starting point Edward Said's observation that the novel as literary form developed in Western bourgeois culture and cannot be thought without taking

[40] Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 100.

[41] John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. For a fruitful discussion of this work in relation to Yugoslav science fiction and monumentality, see Raino Isto, "'I Will Speak in Their Own Language': Yugoslav Socialist Monuments and Science Fiction", *Extrapolation* vol. 70, no. 3, 2019, pp. 299–324.

imperialism into account,[42] namely, that Western imperialist expansion has created the conditions of possibility – the political, economical, and psychological frame of reference – for the novel as literary form to emerge. And by extension, so Rieder argues, the colonialist expansion of empire, the fascination, if not obsession, with the non-white Other that launched entire academic disciplines, created the background against which the imagination, exploration, and conquest of extraterrestrial worlds became a natural extension.[43] Rieder compares science fiction to a "palimpsest, bearing the persistent traces of a stubbornly visible colonial scenario beneath its fantastic script".[44]

In distinction from Western science fiction traditions, where the extraterrestrial landscapes and races bear the distinctive imprint of the colonialist and imperialist enterprises that their countries of origin were engaged in, the way in which extraterrestrial contact is featured in certain works of Albanian science fiction mirrors the attempts of the socialist regime to reach out to and find kinship among precisely those who have

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[42] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage, 1971, pp. 70–71.

[43] This thesis is not only relevant with regard to the onset of science fiction as literary genre, but can be equally applied to the ideological framework of our contemporary space-faring billionaire oligarchy, exemplified by Elon Musk, who combines a rabid racism and apartheid apologism with Rand-style fantasies of a colonial empire on Mars.

[44] Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, p. 15. This specific nature of the science fiction genre as rewriting of mainly subconscious undercurrents of Western culture has been eminently explored by Laurence Rickels, for example in his *Critique of Fantasy*, 3 vols., Earth: punctum books, 2020–21.

become the unconsenting subjects of said imperialism and colonialism. In that sense, these works, while clearly resembling other science fiction traditions, also subvert some of the fundamental precepts of the genre – its "stubbornly visible colonial scenario" – as developed within Western literary traditions. Rather than interpreting Albanian science fiction literature produced during the socialist period within the cultural and ideological framework of Western literary production, as Sulstarova attempts by relying on Suvin's efforts to induce science fiction into the realm of "academic respectability",[45] we perhaps ought to search for resemblances to a different literary kinship. This brings us, then, to Afrofuturism, which arguably is another – and, I argue, kindred – example of a literary genre subverting the precepts of Western science fiction.

As a term, "Afrofuturism" first appears in Mark Dery's series of interviews under the title "Black to the Future", in which he draws parallels between the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the narrative trope of alien abduction, and between the subaltern social status of Black Americans and the "sublegitimate status" of the science fiction literary genre.[46] Tracing its antecedents to the literary works of Samuel R. Delaney and the music of Sun Ra, to name just two important figures, this reading of Afrofuturism firmly aligns with the genealogy sketched out by Rieder with regard to science fiction's origins in Western imperialism and colonialism in general. Adriano Elia has pointed

[45] Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, p. 17.

[46] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose", in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. by Mark Dery, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 179–222 (pp. 179–80).

out that the term "Afrofuturism" itself contains an important tension, namely between its "Afro" and "Futurism" components, "where the former […] used to evoke images of primitivism and backwardness, the latter […] celebrating instead speed and modernity".[47] Afrofuturism, then, reclaims a narrative of the future whose conditions of emergence included precisely the very erasure of Black narratives and lives.

Similar to an African-diasporic reading of future-oriented narratives, which would counteract the frequent exclusion of Black people from discourses of technology and the future in general, we may think of Albanian Socialist Realist science fiction – rife as this conjoined cluster of terms is with contradictions that are difficult, and perhaps also unproductive, to resolve – as a potentially socialist-diasporic, or even Stalinist-diasporic, reading of the genre. I intend here diasporic not in the sense of globally dispersed (even though Albania touts a large diasporic community), but rather in terms of the isolationist policies of a small Southeast European state, a satellite of no one, a political comet coursing along the edges of the European continent. Such a reading would primarily be concerned with the possibility of socialist futures founded in shared anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggle anywhere in the cosmos. I propose that we analogously gather such works under the provisional concept of "Albanofuturism", in the sense that in terms of the historical background of its emergence, its marginal status both with regard to the political and cultural history and context – as well as its minoritarian status vis-à-vis "serious" literature, it

[47] Adriano Elia, "The Languages of Afrofuturism", *Lingue e Linguaggi* no. 12, 2014, pp. 83–96 (p. 84).

shows affinities with Afrofuturism.[48] Albanofuturism at once comprises the subset of Albanian Socialist Realist science fiction that actively engages and interrogates the possibility of socialist, emancipatory futures, including their possible failures, and, because of the timelessness of its very themes, extends beyond the temporal and genre limitations that "Socialist Realism" often implies.

In her exquisite and evocative essay "The Monophobic Response", Afrofuturist author Octavia E. Butler speaks to the unbearable nature of the fact that we are alone in the universe, "the focus of no interest except our consuming interest in ourselves". "Is this too much reality?" she asks. "Yes, this is far too much reality. No wonder we need aliens. No wonder we're so good at creating aliens. No wonder we so often project alienness onto one another."[49] It is the need for a *someone that is not us* to respond to us, to witness us, to take care of us. But also, for a someone to blame, to capture, to destroy. And these aliens are more often than not our fellow human beings. "All the more need then," Butler continues, "to create more cooperative aliens,

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[48] Cf. Samuel E. Delany: "One of the most forceful and distinguishing aspects of science fiction is that it's marginal. It's always at its most honest and most effective when it operates – and claims to be operating – from the margins" (quoted in Dery, "Black to the Future", p. 189). Affinities with early Soviet science-fiction literature have been productively developed by Anindita Banerjee, "T/Racing Revolution between Red October and the Black Atlantic", in *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*, ed. Anindita Banerjee and Sonja Fritzsche, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 23–49.

[49] Octavia E. Butler, "The Monophobic Response", in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas, New York: Warner Books, 2000, p. 415.

supernatural beings or intelligences from the stars".[50] It is not difficult to read into these lines not only the Afrofuturist kinship between Black diaspora and extraterrestrials – as explicitly suggested in Dilo's *Takim me yjorët e Adës* – but equally the role of aliens in Albanofuturist literature as the ideal solidary race, affirming the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the Albanian nation.

For example, in *Shëtitje në kozmos* (*Wanderings in the Cosmos*) by Alqi Kristo from 1972,[51] Stefan Koroveshi meets an alien journalist called Martilius from the planet Kato (an anagram of *Toka*, the Albanian word for "Earth"). Kato has already experienced a "Great Revolution" which saw the overthrow of the ruling class of capitalists (*cilatipakët*, a quasi-anagram of *capitalist*), which ended the existence of private property, and heralded the beginning of Kato's "modern development".[52] Martilius takes Stefan on a trip to Kato, and along the way they encounter several alien civilizations. On the planet Matala, the Homomars, a race of telepathic penguin-people that absorb hydrocarbons and proteins from the atmosphere, have fully dedicated themselves to arms production. After being subjected to a show trial when unable to provide details on the creation of a nuclear bomb, Stefan and Martilius narrowly escape death, aided by the solar weapons of the Homomars' undersea cousins and arch-enemies, the much more civilized Homomats. On the planet Zeda, they encounter a race of hermaphrodites, particularly interested in Earth's and Kato's defense systems, as

[50] Ibid., p. 416.

[51] Alqi Kristo, *Shëtitje në kozmos*, Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1972.

[52] Ibid., p. 25. See also Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 109.

they are in search of another planet to colonize after the death of their sun. Stefan and Martilius instead help the Zedans find a more suitable planet that wouldn't require war or genocide to be made inhabitable.

When they finally arrive on Kato, Stefan encounters a full-on post-Great Revolution civilization, a roboticized matriarchy without planned obsolescence, accidents, or alcohol; a worldview based on dialectic materialism; and converter belt sidewalks, global birth control, bioengineered digestive systems, the abolition of money, thought readers, artificial organs, zero crime rates, and maglev high speed rail. In other words, Kristo basically describes Kato as a society of what Aaron Bastani recently called "fully automated luxury communism". [53] Although Stefan's trip is somewhat marred by a robot rebellion, he eventually safely returns to Earth with a feminist message for all women from the women of Kato, the promise of interplanetary postal connections, and a spaceshipload of alien technology and genetically engineered seeds. Having spent years traveling the cosmos, relativity has wreaked its havoc on his timeline and he returns – still a young man – on 24 July 2014 to a fully urbanized Tirana where, of course, no one believes his story of intergalactic travel. Barely avoiding internment at a psychiatric hospital, he is eventually placed under the protection of the Albanian Academy of Sciences and allowed to share his knowledge with his compatriots.

Sulstarova argues that "the more developed alien humanoid societies […] serve as a mirror to the socialist Albania of the 20th

[53] Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto*, London: Verso, 2019.

century", demonstrating "that Albania has chosen the true path that would lead to a brighter future towards communism".[54] However, my reading of *Shëtitje në kozmos* is not that univocal. First of all, Martilius comes off, despite his advanced technological civilization, as a bit naive. It is Stefan – always vigilant and somewhat paranoid – who convinces him to bring guns on their visit to the Homomars, which saves them in the end. Furthermore, Katian society is not without its problems, as illustrated by the robot rebellion and the ensuing paranoia and speciesism (Stefan is accused of being a foreign instigator of the rebellion, a rumor that a planet-wide compulsory thought-reading scan quickly dispels). Stefan has serious issues with the matriarchal nature of Katian gender relationships, although the Zedan hermaphrodites arguably shocked him even more. Indeed, Katian post-Great Revolution society is in many ways a communist paradise created by "ideal" aliens, but certainly not a wholesale vindication of Albania's ideological path in the 1970s. Furthermore, other alien civilizations in the book clearly mimic the imperialist and expansionist caricatures of Albania's enemies, if not somewhat underhandedly parodying Albania's show trials and emphasis on military vigilance. In other words, from an Albanofuturist perspective, Kristo's book posits aliens as engaged with very much the same anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles as Albania, including the imagination of the ideal outcome of these struggles – while also refraining from idealizing them.

[54] See Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 110.

IV. TOWARD STAR DEATH

This lack of idealization, a reflection of the complexities and actual real-world anti-imperialist struggle, then bring us back to Butler's "more cooperative aliens". As Jonida Gashi has argued in a recent presentation, the search for and encounter with alien brotherhood was not so much a gesture of concealment, distraction, or even entertainment, but rather an act of *compensation*.[55] Because there was a lot to compensate for. Despite the many attempts of the Albanian socialist government to reach out to other countries, their success in sustainably connecting with kindred political parties remained limited, especially when compared to the international relations established by other Eastern European countries with the Middle East and other Third World countries. And when relations with China deteriorated toward the end of the 1970s, also the little financial support provided by the Albanian government came to an end, and tentative relations were reestablished with Western European countries. It is in this context that we arrive at what is arguably the major science fiction novel of the Albanian socialist period, Arion Hysenbegas's *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* (*Toward Epsilon Eridani*) from 1983, which relates the voyage of spaceship *Kometa* (*The Comet*) to make first contact with an alien race that has sent a signal to Earth from the star system Epsilon

[55] Jonida Gashi, "Back to the Beginning: Lucid Nightmares of the End of History in Armando Lulaj's *TOWARDS*", presentation at *3RD IN THE PALACE ISFF CONFERENCE: Short Film in the Balkans and Eastern Europe: Archive, Memory and Transnational Histories*, 4-5 July 2024, Pernik (Bulgaria).

Eridani. Although Sulstarova considers this work, because of its setting in the distant future of the year 2474, to be "largely free of the crude propaganda about national communism" that he claims characterizes other Albanofuturist works,[56] Gashi argues that because the novel portrays the persistence of class struggle across the universe and its culmination in the eradication of private property in a "timeless [and] *boundless Stalinism*", it is precisely more and not less dogmatic than other works.[57] And in its "dogmatism" it actually provides even more compensation, more cooperation, than previous Albanofuturist literature: the deeper the disillusion about establishing communism on Earth, the greater its imagined spread through the future universe.

But is precisely in this apparently dogmatic work that we find a first intimation of regime collapse. In *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, the crew of spaceship *Kometa*, led by mathematician Olton Plakonia, encounters *en route* the strong gravitational pull of an invisible object. Eager to explore the origin of this unknown force, they maneuver their spaceship in proximity of the source and discover, only 2.7 lightyears from Earth, a giant, dark extinguished star surrounded, like our Sun, by a planetary system.[58] The theme of the "star death" has clear parallels in other Albanian science fiction literature. In Kristo's *Shëtitje në kozmos*, as mentioned above, the protagonists assist with the mass evacuation of planet Zeda after its star has died, while in Dilo's *Takim me yjorët e Adës*, the Global Center for Astronomic Research, led by a certain Kerim Ahmet, dispatches an Albanian

[56] Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 108.
[57] Gashi, "Back to the Beginning". Emphasis in the original.
[58] Hysenbegas, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, p. 65.

rescue mission beyond Alpha Centauri in an act of "cosmic solidarity"[59] to the planet PT2, which has lost its sole source of solar energy. Rather than moving the population of PT2 to another planet, in this case the entire planet is moved into a different orbit by means of massive engines attached to both its poles.[60]

It is tempting to posit star death as a common narrative trope in Albanofuturism, being the preoccupation of several literary works.[61] Allegorically, star death may be understood to represent the failure or even collapse of communism, which often, including on the Albanian flag, was symbolized by a red star outlined in yellow.[62] Even though never made explicit (this would no doubt never have passed the censors), the failure of communism thus turns out to be, even if unconsciously, an object of contemplation in Albanofuturist literature, and the cause of considerable anxiety. In both *Shëtitje në kozmos* and *Takim me yjorët e Adës*, Albania is actively involved in rescue operations, thus symbolizing the country as the "savior" of communism, transporting entire planetary populations into the light of a newly found star.

What is remarkable in *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, however,

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[59] "SOLIDARITETI KOZMIK" (Dilo, *Takim me yjorët e Adës*, p. 15).

[60] Ibid., p. 17. A plot device akin to the one used in Cixin Liu's short story "The Wandering Earth". See Cixin Liu, *The Wandering Earth*, New York: TOR, 2022.

[61] Another may be the supremacy of humanity over robots and artificial intelligence. This is for example an important theme in "Dashuria e robotëve" and *Shëtitje në kozmos*, where a robot uprising is barely avoided.

[62] And indeed, after the fall of the socialist regime, the star was removed from nearly all public monuments.

is that the dead star is figured as object of quiet contemplation rather than as incitement to action: communism has already died and inside the *Kometa* the crew – shockingly, one may say from a perspective of its ideological implications – reflects on the possibility of life *after* communism: "Who can say life on it has disappeared?" asks astrobiologist Epikad Skred:

> "Who can say with conviction and be in a position to prove that here, over thousands and thousands of years […] micro-organisms and even living beings have not been able to slowly adjust to the new conditions […]? And why wouldn't life flourish on the surface of this star under the radiation conditions shown by our devices?! A life that is maybe different from the one that we are used to?!… […] Besides, what right do we have to think that what is fully acceptable and proven by our experience on Earth is also necessary for this star and its family of planets?!"[63]

It is in this "striking passage"[64] about the "Black Siren […] which sparked a curiosity *that wasn't only scientific*"[65] that

[63] "Kush mund të thotë me bindje e të jetë në gjendje ta vërtetojë se këtu, gjatë mijëra vjetësh […] mikroorganizmat e deri qeniet e gjalla nuk kanë mundur të përshtaten pak nga pak në kushtet e reja […]? E pse në sipërfaqen e këtij ylli e në kushtet e rrezatimit që tregojnë aparatet të mos lulëzojë jeta?! Një jetë ndoshta e ndryshme nga ajo që për ne është e zakonshme?!… […] Pastaj, ç'të drejtë kemi ne të mendojmë se ajo që është plotësisht e pranueshme dhe e vërtetuar nga përvoja jonë tokësore, është e detyrueshme edhe për këtë yll e për familjen e planeteve të tij?!" (Hysenbegas, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, pp. 67–68).

[64] Gashi, "Back to the Beginning".

[65] Hysenbegas, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, p. 71. My emphasis.

Hysenbegas presents us with one of the first prefigurations of the end of the communist regime, the possibility of life after ideological death. And, notably, this is the first major event in the entire voyage of the *Kometa*. It is perhaps through this image of the dead star that we may consider the futures of Albanofuturism itself: an ongoing contemplation of the failures not only of communism but also of neoliberal capitalism, as witnessed by the economic collapse of 1997 and the subsequent rise of the narco-state as an alternative governmentality over recent decades.[66]

Although Sulstarova already remarks that no Albanian science fiction literature of note has been published after the fall of communism,[67] a recapitulation and further development of Albanofuturist themes may nevertheless be found in other disciplines. Gashi has already established convincing links between the figure of star death in *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* and the imagery featured in the short film by Albanian artist Armando Lulaj, *TOWARDS* (2023), which takes place in part on a drifting space ship. Based on Hysenbegas's novel and prominently featuring the image of a burning star from archival footage of

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[66] See, for example, Borzou Daragahi, "'Colombia of Europe': How Tiny Albania Became the Continent's Drug Trafficking Headquarters", *The Independent*, 27 January 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/albania-drug-cannabis-trafficking-hub-europe-adriatic-sea-a8747036.html [last accessed: 24 September 2025]; Monty Reed, "The Inside Story of Europe's First Narco-State", *Vice*, 6 June 2019, https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-inside-story-of-europes-first-narco-state/; and more recently my own work for *The Albanian Mechanism*, https://thealbanianmechanism.substack.com/ [last accessed: 24 September 2025].

[67] Sulstarova, "The Future of a Stalinist State", p. 99.

Lulaj's 2004 work *Living in Memory*, *TOWARDS* forms an extended contemplation of Albania's twentieth-century history.[68] It would be thus my suggestion that Lulaj's film forms the most recent incarnation of the Albanofuturist themes first established in Socialist Realist science fiction literature,[69] albeit with the distinction that it is no longer only the failure of communism upon which it shines its dark light. The collapse of both communism and the neoliberal world order forms the background of our present, and neither aliens nor robots are here to save us. The wager of Albanofuturism is that it is always up to humankind united to provide salvation. For, significantly, in not a single Albanian science fiction novel humankind is ever saved – ever *needs* saving.[70]

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[68] See Gashi, "Back to the Beginning" for an extended analysis. *TOWARDS* is in fact based on both *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* and a later science fiction work published by Hysenbegas at the very moment of the transition to democracy, *Lundrimi im i parë*, Tirana: Shtëpia Botuese "8 Nëntori", 1991. In the former, planets and aliens have the anagrammatic names of Hysenbegas's family members, providing a remarkable example of Butler's "cooperative aliens". In the latter, Hysenbegas literally brings his family into outer space, in an eerie prefiguration of the waves of emigration washing over the country post-1991 (personal communication with Armando Lulaj, who, not irrelevantly, is also Hysenbegas's nephew).

[69] As regards broader connections between Lulaj's work and Socialist Realism, see my "The Production of Hrönir: Albanian Socialist Realism and After", in *Workers Leaving the Studio: Looking Away from Socialist Realism,* ed. by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Earth: punctum books, 2015, pp. 191–207.

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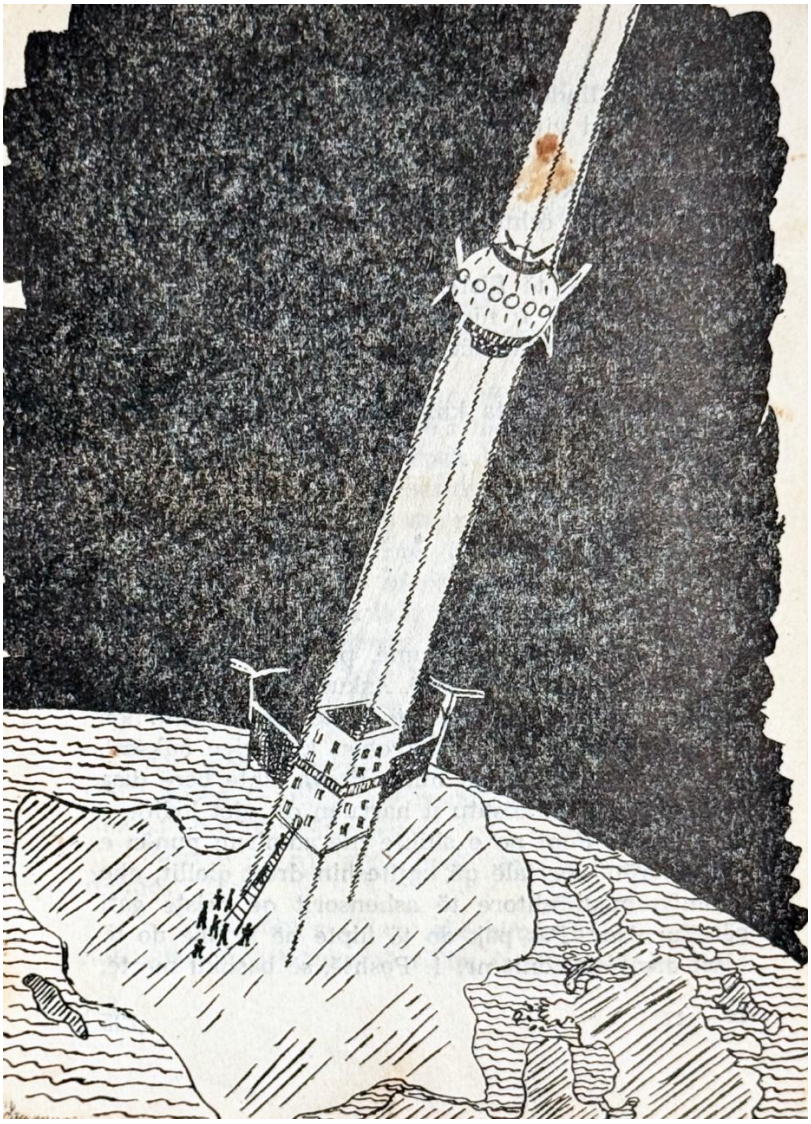

Fig. 1. Illustration of the space elevator in Thanas Qerama's short story, "Katastrofa e ashensorit qiellor" ("The Catastrophe of the Space Elevator"), published in 1981.