POLICY PAPER

KOSOVARNESS THROUGH CINEMA

Soft-power and self-perception in pictures (2017-2024)

THE BALKAN FORUM

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Title: “Kosovarness through cinema. Soft-power and self-perception through language (2017-2024)”

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The Balkan Forum is a regional think tank based in Pristina, Kosovo, dedicated to fostering cooperation, sustainable development, and peace across the Western Balkans. Through research, dialogue, and innovative partnerships, the organization works to bridge sectors and communities by addressing common challenges in areas such as energy, environment, youth engagement, and cultural diplomacy. With a strong emphasis on regional connectivity and inclusive policy-making, The Balkan Forum supports initiatives that promote long-term stability and shared prosperity in the region.

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Dedication:

Jeta Abazi Gashi (*shqip)*:

> *Kjo është gjuha dhe këto janë rrëfimet. Përmes filmave po shohim vetëm një mënyrë se si çikat dhe gratë e Kosovës e vazhdojnë jetën, sa të forta që janë. Ky dedikim është për gratë e forta të jetës sime: Teuta, Valbona, Mira, Sentona, Qëndresa, Arta, Leonora, Rondinella, Kaltrina, Majlinda, Drilona, Remzie, Prespa, Blerta…*

Juan Manuel Montoro:

> *Dedico este trabajo a mis hijas, Elisa y Sara, con un compromiso en activo: Papá sigue ayudando al país de las líneas punteadas a seguir dibujándose con su propia cartuchera, a encontrar un color propio que le permita integrarse al mapa colorido de países de la Unión Europea — ese mapa que colgaremos juntos mientras celebramos la vida.*

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I- INTRODUCTION

As a young Republic with less than two decades of existence and roughly 1.8 million inhabitants, Kosovo's film sector stands as a flourishing industry with over 30 productions completed annually,[1] more than 350 registred producing companies as active players in its media ecosystem[2] and several awards and recognitions in festivals and specialized press. Kosovo's contemporary creative industries are more than a fashionable trend. They enact a powerful resource to boost reputation internationally and catalyze key debates within its society.

This is a policy brief about Kosovo's cinema: (1) how it represents Kosovarness through a selected corpus of films launched between 2017 and 2021, and (2) how Kosovo's stories help the country promote its soft power overseas while also catalyzing internal social debates. Overall, we have analyzed almost ten hours of films and interviewed four filmmakers and one film producer. Our theoretical and methodological foundations lie on a combination of Erwing Goffman's theory of symbolic interactionism with Algirdas J. Greimas' generative semiotics. We have also relied on the term "soft power", coined by Joseph Nye, to describe a form of influence that relies on attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment.[3]

As authors, we stress that we are neither deconstructing the Albanian national identity nor proposing the emergence of a Kosovar specific identity. Our work is limited to analyze how Kosovo represents itself through cinema.

[1] Kosovo Cinematography Center (2025).
[2] "Production Companies" in Kosovo Cinemetography Center, [https://qkk-rks.com/en-us/production-companies/].
[3] Joseph Nye, who passed away this May, left behind a significant legacy in understanding and theorizing concepts related to public diplomacy.

1. Justification: Why are we doing this?

In an increasingly interconnected world, a nation's global reputation is no longer built solely on economic output or military might, but on the stories it tells and the cultural footprints it leaves behind. From South Korea's cinematic revolution—transforming it from a tech-and-cars powerhouse into a benchmark of global cultural production—to Japan's central role in shaping contemporary pop culture through manga and gaming, countries are strategically leveraging culture as a soft power asset. Estonia's bold digital nation branding, Australia and New Zealand's global rise through rugby, and the cultural diplomacy embedded in the music of Argentina, Ghana, or South Africa, all respond to a fundamental logic: reputation today is, at least partially, shaped by culture. Understanding and integrating culture into national strategies is not a luxury: it is a necessity for relevance and resonance in the 21st century. Kosovo is not an exception.

We assume that the local and international public needs to see this country with broader lenses and with more nuances. We think that there is not one narrative or one story; we believe there is more to the story. This idea inspired us to do this work.

Democracies need to dedicate time, money, and political will to debate which stories will define them internally and promote their identities externally. They must critically engage with the stories that are being told, and discuss to whom, in what manner, from which perspectives, and whether these are the stories that represent 'us' and can eventually help achieve the goals 'we' set as a society. This does not have to be at the expense of the technical matters, but it cannot be dissociated from them either. It should function as an underlying spring that makes sense to strategic decision-making.

Modern nationhood was historically crafted after a technological, narrative, and economic device: print capitalism.[4] The fact that a mass of people could read the same news every day in an accessible language spread the idea of citizenship to far-reaching parts of the territory because it managed to articulate a public sphere.[5] Later, the emergence of literature in European local languages outlined inventories of nations with

[4] Anderson (1983).
[5] Habermas (1985), Schlesinger (2020).

their respective traditions, myths, and legends,[6] so these national templates consolidated specific contents. In other words, it was the set of 'national' stories what forged an imaginary that inspired and guided modern societies to outline a 'we' that transcended immediate interpersonal social ties. The story of *'who we are'* is crucially important because it is an attempt to counter the narrative of what '*we are not'*. Thus, crafting stories about the state is not an easy task.

And is there one story that could capture all the colors and peculiarities of a person—let alone of a state? There are no eyes, no ears, no senses capable of catching all the multiple nuances—the beauty, the pain, the sacrifices, the contradictions—that shape a life or a nation.

Subsequent media/technological breakthroughs such as the telegraph, the radio, and the television deepened this process, equipping nations with a powerful reach in the user/citizen experience. A banal example of this is the coverage that can still be seen today of sports tournaments, particularly national cycling circuits: the athletes travel across the territory, stopping in different cities, with abundant images of the landscapes, and journalists commenting on the specifics of each region, including its food and customs. Echoing, 'we are the best' in the background. The same happens with regards to international projection: the global penetration of the Olympic Games and World Cup football tournaments has not blurred the individuality of nation-states but, on the contrary, has offered even the most remote states a potent showcase of visibility and global interconnection.

Thus we ask, what about other forms of 'we-ness' expression, such as art and film?

Certainly, cinema has not been strange to this process. To the extent that its industry is strongly marked by the country-of-origin effect.[7] Film data prioritize the 'national belonging' of the producer companies that make films and, by doing so, it empowers national industries by giving them worldwide audience. Most nation-states in the world were constituted during an analogical era, which allowed them to define a cultural canon

[6] Hobsbawm (1983).
[7] Al-Sulaiti & Baker (1998).

(and eventually question, debate, and propose alternatives to it) within certain institutional guarantees over the media ecosystem.

Today, the world is radically different: the digital era is eroding the networks of solidarity within those 'imagined communities' and atomizing the user/citizen experience into multiple, individual ways.[8] This is happening while we live in fast-changing, superdiverse societies[9] where the notion of citizenship is increasingly distancing itself from an ethnic and ancestral belonging, also 'imagined' but posed through a primitivistic bias. We live in a global society, which does not necessarily imply the demise of the world of nations[10] as we know it, but it does renegotiate the loyalties and affinities that were once monopolized by state/national projects. We also live in a time of uncertainty and war, which brings forward questions of belonging and protection.

In a complementary way, cinema also plays a crucial role for internal stakeholders in the case of young states, because it equips their societies with self-images with which such a state can build its own narratives, review its shared past and project towards the future. Considering the scarcity of socially agreed symbols that are univocally linked to any newborn state, media and cultural industries (like music, cinema and sports) stand as privileged factories of stories that hold the potentiality of molding the new state's character. This is one of the greatest differences between those collectivities that consolidated statehood during the 19th Century and the ones that achieved independence in the 20th Century after colonialism. While in the former ones, literature remained as the sole source of foundational storytelling through historical novels and epic poems, the latter ones opted for audiovisual language to craft a narrative telling who we are.

These struggles are faced by both large and small states, powerful and less powerful. Now imagine the challenges for states that are projected as entirely new—such as the case of Kosovo. With only 17 years (counting up to 2025) of existence as a state, the Republic of Kosovo is a teenager of this era. This is why it needs to match its storytelling industries with its strategic goals not only for promoting itself overseas but also to find a proper narrative to understand what it means to be Kosovar (overwhelmingly Albanian, along

[8] Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez (2021).
[9] Vertovec (2007).
[10] Mihelj (2011).

with other communities). In addition, Kosovo has a long and complex history of identities formation involving Albanians and other communities, including Serbs, Turks, Bosnians, Roma, and Egyptians.

In the last decade, Kosovo has been growing a considerable film industry. Given that only from 2008 the Kosova's Cinematography Center (KCC) holds the central role in overseeing cinematography in Kosovo, there are numerous promising examples of independent film companies in the region. Namely, the short film "Shok" (2015) garnered an Oscar nomination for its portrayal of the 1990s war in Kosovo. The film "Hive" (2021) secured three major awards at the Sundance Film Festival. Similarly, the short film "Displaced" (2021) earned important milestones, including a nomination in Cannes Film Festival as Best Short Film. In the international arena, Kosovo has achieved to present its local talents and films have been recognized abroad by specialized critics and international juries.

This policy paper is a first attempt to explore the layers and nuances of films produced through Kosovo's cinema. Specifically, it examines the narratives these films convey and cultural impact of their stories, and their overarching aims. In this policy brief, we combine social interaction, the presentation of Self with the semiotics of sociology to deconstruct the emerging themes and messages conveyed through these movies, and highlight the importance of identifying new and potentially disruptive representations of 'Kosovar identity' (state identity) based on testimonials from local voices. In the overall picture, we are combining micro and macro analyses of the language as presented through the stories of the movies that have presented Kosovo abroad and the filmmakers themselves.

2. Literature Review

In the contemporary world, public diplomacy involves efforts by a state to influence the public in another state to support it and its policies. This is done through means such as media/information, culture and education. To avoid confusion with the term 'propaganda', an American diplomat Edmund Guillon proposed the term "public

diplomacy," and it has since become one of the most widely used concepts in international relations and nation branding.

We explore how cinema is used as an instrument of public diplomacy. How much is this topic explored?

Studies that have explored how cinema has been used as a tool of soft power have focused on how certain states used cinema as a tool, referring to Hollywood *cinema as an instrument to transform memories and perceptions.*[11] Apart from the U.S., the Indian cinema, supported by a vast diaspora, has created opportunities to advance India's public diplomacy. It explores the global impact of Indian cinema as a powerful tool of soft power.[12] "James Bond" films have been widely discussed as a form of soft power, particularly in promoting British culture, values, and influence on a global stage. James Bond's films are replete with British imagery, iconography, institutions, flags and characters.[13] Additionally, from Ireland to Burkina Faso and from Cuba to Taiwan, cinema has been a powerful resource to empower 'small nations'.[14] Interestingly, cinema has been used not only for promoting a nation overseas but also to pose relevant questions and debate issues of social significance with local stakeholders, especially in the case of post-traumatic societies.[15] For instance, the efforts of post-apartheid South African cinema –and its overall strategies of promoting a nation brand through media– were not only targeted to increase revenues and improve external image but also to gain social cohesion.[16]

With similar concerns, recurrent themes in Latin America cinema industries often address the problem of how its contemporary societies achieve transitional justice after dreadful dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1980s,[17] something that could impact negatively in their respective nation brands. Most Latin American nation branding campaigns seek to distance themselves from negative stereotypes by highlighting either natural assets—such

[11] Zamorano (2016).
[12] Thussu (2019).
[13] Higsson (2021, 212).
[14] Hjort (2005).
[15] Violi (2017).
[16] Cooke (2021).
[17] Cunha (2021).

as in "*Uruguay Natural*" or "*Esencial Costa Rica*"—or cultural and human experiences, as in "Bolivia Waits For You" or "El Salvador, as big as its people." In contrast, Colombia adopted a bold and unconventional strategy in the early 2010s. Rather than ignoring the country's associations with terrorism, drug trafficking, and insecurity, Colombian officials acknowledged these realities and made them the starting point for engaging with international audiences. This approach not only demanded improvements in public management, but it also required integrating these themes into the national discourse in a transformative way. Instead of evading its troubled past, Colombia aimed to reframe it. This strategy materialized in the campaign slogan *"El único riesgo es que que te quieras quedar" ("The only risk is wanting to stay"),* supported by a powerful storytelling effort featuring affluent immigrants from the so-called "first world" who had chosen to live in Colombia and talked positively about that life decision. The campaign was a global success in terms of marketing and public relations, and it significantly shifted the international perception of Colombia. No longer viewed primarily as a dangerous destination, the country began to emerge as a South American hub for business, fashion, music, literature, and tourism. Cities like *Medellín* became benchmarks for specialized tourism sectors such as nightlife and cosmetic surgery. Through this process, Colombia managed to change the story by reshaping its narrative and challenging long-held stereotypes. It successfully reframed global media portrayals—take, for instance, the Netflix series *Narcos*—as sources of curiosity rather than judgment or condescension. This shift also renewed a sense of pride among Colombians themselves, after decades of mistrust and hopelessness.[18]

Consequently, films not only represent a given identity and project it to foreign audiences to improve a country's external image, but they also actively participate in the ongoing construction of that identity and reputation, which are interdependent. An example of this is the classic *The Battle of Algiers* (1966),[19] which recreates Algeria's struggle for independence against French colonial rule, even with actors who were real fighters in the conflict. The film not only documents and mythologizes a glorious recent past but also offers interpretive keys for the new nation to be built. In a different but analogous tone,

[18] A selection of available literature on this case: Vanegas 2016; Echeverri et al 2017, Echeverri 2019. The above mention analysis, however, implies a critical engagement with these works.
[19] Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo. A co-production between Italy and Argelia.

the film *Wan Pipel* (1974)[20] explores the identity conflicts of a character devoted to an interethnic love in the context of a brand-new country, Suriname, that needed to define its identity after its political emancipation from the Netherlands. Perhaps the most explicit case of a cinematic appeal to the construction of nationality is the documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* (1967), in which Irish director Peter Lennon asks what happens after achieving a revolution, and whether the independence dreams from 45 years earlier were realized or not.

Ample studies have dealt with Balkan cinema, particularly exploring how films capture the dynamic interplay between perception and self-perception.[21] To demonstrate cinema's power in telling stories, Angelina Jolie's 2011 film *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, which she directed, addresses the war rapes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some scholars that it is a narrative of "a history of ethnic hatred" as a prime cause of war in the former Yugoslavia. Žarkov and Drezgić analyzed such films as a cinematic representation of the Bosnian War, highlighting the complexities of the conflict and its impact on identity and memory.[22] Admiration was due to the attention she brought to such a sensitive issue—one that, especially in times of war, transcends the specific case of Bosnian women who suffered without receiving the recognition they deserved.

Although Kosovo's cinema is frequently mentioned in public discourse, it is fair to say that there is still a lack of extensive academic writing on the subject. Kosovo's cinema, in the last five years, has gained recognition for its ability to represent the country in the international public sphere.[23] According to Di Lellio & Kraja, post-war films have begun to unveil unheard voices, addressing the memories of war and questioning the gender roles imposed by the societal framework.[24] While some articles have not fully embraced the rise of Albanian filmmakers from Kosovo exposing the consequences of the war, recent work[25] claims that Kosovo's contemporary films counteract defeatist narratives of survivor silencing—both by the legal system and local patriarchal norms. Kosovo's post

[20] Directed by Pim De la Barra. A Surinamese production.
[21] Iordanova (2019)
[22] Žarkov and Drezgić (2019).
[23] A series of press articles worth mentioning to engage with coverage of Kosovar cinema: Hamadey (2019), Halili (2024), Isufi & Bami (2021).
[24] Di Lelio & Kraja (2021).
[25] Aleksić (2024).

war films provide a glimpse into a society that is changing, despite the tragedy it has endured. Some recent scholars explored cultural diplomacy in Kosovo's post-independence period, focusing primarily on the role of non-state actors[26] and international programs that also incorporate elements of public diplomacy.[27] Though we have scholarly works that address the characteristics of films made in Kosovo, there is still a need for a goal-oriented work that bridges its storytelling with actionable plans.

3. Methods & Theory

1. Research Questions

i. How do Kosovar filmmakers use cinema to construct and communicate narratives about identity, gender, migration, and the recent past?

ii. What image of Kosovo is projected to international audiences through its contemporary films, and how do filmmakers anticipate or shape that perception?

iii. To what extent does Kosovar cinema function as a tool of soft power, and how does it contribute to social debate and cultural development within the country?

We have selected a pool of films based on two criteria: (a) they were produced with the support of Kosovo's highest cinematographic institution, the Kosovo Cinematography Center (KCC), and (b) they have received recognition through international awards.

The analysis is structured in two parts. *First,* we engage in close viewing of the films, identifying and extracting key textual speech acts. These will be examined using discourse analysis, combining frame analysis with generative semiotics. This approach will allow us to identify core values, recurring characters, and thematic patterns (semantic isotopies) across the corpus. The films were viewed and analyzed by both authors, Jeta

[26] Saliu & Llunji (2022)
[27] Mehani (2024).

Abazi Gashi and Juan Manuel Montoro. After individual analysis, we shared notes and collaboratively identified common themes. We acknowledge that our interpretations are subjective and shaped by our perspectives as viewers, and we take full responsibility for any inherent bias. However, we believe that our differing backgrounds—local and international, as well as our gender diversity—have enriched the analysis by bringing multiple lenses to the interpretation of the material. As already mentioned, this project draws on two complementary theoretical traditions: Erving Goffman's sociology—particularly frame analysis and symbolic interactionism—and the generative structural semiotics developed by the Paris School.

2. Theoretical and methodological foundations

Here we are going to provide more details about the theoretical foundation. We rely on the concept of *soft power,*[28] as an ability to shape the preferences of others. In the theoretical framework, this project draws on two complementary traditions: the sociology of Erving Goffman, particularly through tools such as frame analysis and symbolic interaction theory; and the generative structural semiotics developed by the Paris School, led by figures like Algirdas Julien Greimas, Jean-Marie Floch, and, more recently, Jacques Fontanille.[29]

Goffman's framework enables us to interpret the narrative journeys and character performances in Kosovar cinema as intelligible representations of real-life social actors. Traditionally, Goffmanian analysis has been used to observe everyday life as a form of staged performance. This project reverses that path, proposing that fictional characters, too, can be read as cultural representatives of behavioral models rooted in specific societies. By applying Goffman to fictional film narratives, we open analytical bridges between narrative cultural devices (cinema, literature, theater, music) and social representations of everyday life. These bridges allow us to explore how fiction does not merely reflect social structures but actively contributes to their performative reinforcement or contestation. In this sense, Kosovar cinema can be understood as an

[28] Nye (2004).

[29] For a beginner's readership in English of this tradition, it is highly recommended to start with Hawkes (1977), Chandler (2022), Culler (1981). If the reader comprehends Italian, then Pozzato (2020).

arena in which both individual and collective identities are rehearsed and negotiated. Characters are not only mirrors of a social reality but also agents who rehearse possible futures — navigating roles of victimhood, agency, modernity, or marginality. Their actions, decisions, silences, and even absences must be interpreted as coded gestures in a broader cultural performance. This renders cinema a space of situated dramaturgy, where the conditions of nationhood, recognition, and social belonging are played out, often in tension with external audiences and internal expectations. However, Goffman's model—centered on micro-sociological performance and symbolic interactionism—needs to be complemented by a structural framework of value attribution. This is where the Greimasian semiotic approach becomes a crucial addition. The semiotic square, developed by Greimas[30] and extended by his colleagues, is a powerful analytical tool that positions values within a structural axis of difference.

Each term (value A) is defined not only in contrast to its contrary (not-A) but also in its complementary opposition (B) and the negation of that complement (not-B). This quadrilateral model allows for the systematic mapping of meaning within a discourse, revealing the underlying semantic tensions and alignments that structure cultural narratives. The square thus identifies both qualitative oppositions (difference) and quantitative oppositions (absence or negation), producing a matrix through which Kosovar cinema can be read as a field of value construction.

[30] Greimas (1966; 1970; 1976). For a proper definition of how the semiotic square works in English, see Greimas & Courtes (1982).

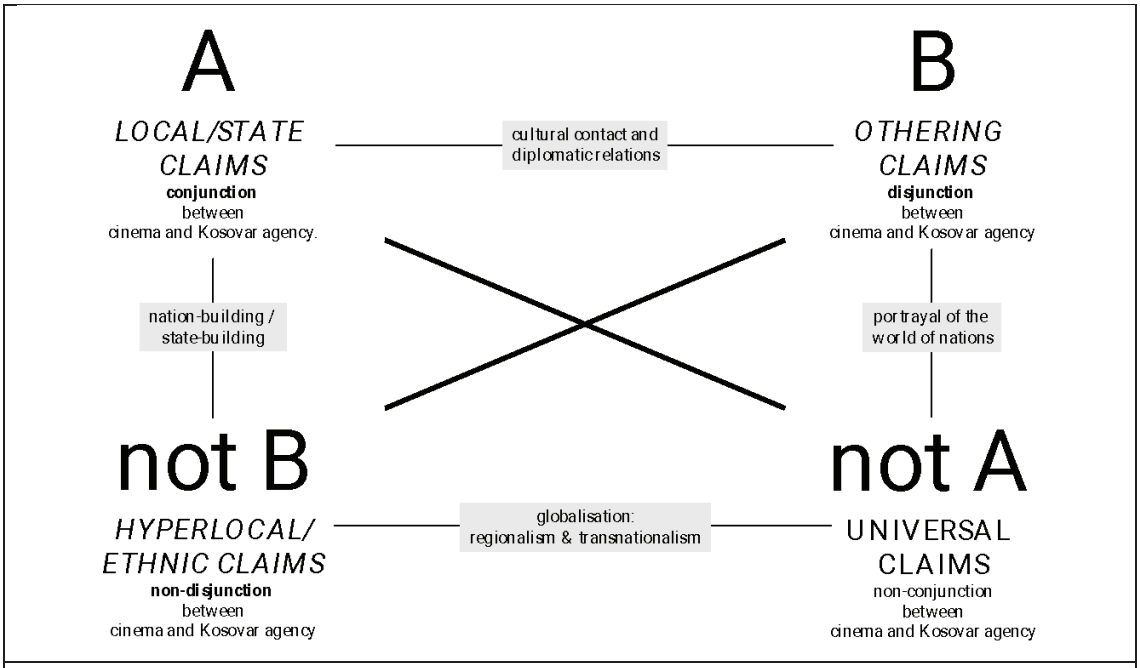

Fig. 1 – A semiotic square that identifies interplay of opposite and complementary terms. Designed by the authors.

To further this line of inquiry, it is key to adopt the perspective of (cultural) semiotics not only as a mechanism for mapping narrative logic but also for testing cultural *isotopies* — that is, recurring semantic lines that structure meaning.[31] We will treat these isotopies as regulatory hypotheses of culture: expected meaning patterns that operate beneath the surface of discourse.[32] By identifying these isotopies in Kosovar cinema, we can examine whether and how they materialize in individual texts and what variations or subversions they undergo. Do the films reproduce, confront, or reconfigure the dominant value structures implied in Kosovo's cultural, political, and social fields?

Furthermore, semiotics allows us to distinguish between different regimes of meaning production —from the pragmatic and cognitive to the esthetic and ethic regimes.[33] In the context of Kosovar cinema, this differentiation is vital to understand whether a film's value system appeals to utility, knowledge, identity, or moral vision. Such a reading can reveal whether cinematic representations function as calls to action, reflections of

[31] According to Umberto Eco (1979), a semantic isotopy consists of a series of repetitions and recurrences in a given text –or corpus, in this case– that provides it coherence and orients its reading. For an English-speaking understanding of Eco's interpretative semiotics, see Bianchi & Vassallo (2015).
[32] Lorusso (2015).
[33] Floch (1990).

understanding, affirmations of belonging, or critiques of injustice. The semiotic square, in this sense, is not merely a descriptive tool, but a dynamic matrix for testing how values are configured, contested, and transposed across narrative levels. This combined Goffmanian and semiotic framework allows for an innovative approach to analysis: one that reads fiction not only as symbolic interaction but also as value negotiation. The approach builds bridges between micro-performances and macro-structures, making visible the encoded value systems behind gestures, decisions, silences, and symbolic artifacts onscreen. In doing so, it provides a robust methodological foundation for understanding how cinema can function as both a mirror and a maker of contemporary Kosovo's symbolic landscape.

3. Corpus of the work

Our analysis focuses on a selection of films produced with the support of the Kosovo Cinematography Center (KCC), all of which have gained international recognition.

1. *The Marriage*[34] (2017, Dir.: Blerta Zeqiri), 97 minutes.
2. The Flying Circus[35] (2019, Dir: Fatos Berisha), 115 minutes.
3. *Exile*[36] (2020, Dir.: Visar Morina), 121 minutes.
4. *Hive*[37] (2021, Dir.: Blerta Basholli), 84 minutes.
5. *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*[38] (2021, Dir.: Luàna Bajrami), 83 minutes
6. *Vera Dreams of the Sea*[39] (2021, Dir.: Kaltrina Krasniqi), 82 minutes.

Three of these films (*The Marriage*, *Exile*, and *Hive*) were selected as Kosovo's official entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the Academy Awards in their respective years. *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar* and *Vera Dreams of the Sea* have

[34] *Martesa*, as originally named in Albanian. It was produced by Kosovo. Considering this paper is written in English, all films will be mentioned in their respective titles in English language.
[35] Cirku Fluturues as originally named in Albanian. It was produced by Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia.
[36] *Exil* as originally named in German. It was co-produced by Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia.
[37] *Zgoj* as originally named in Albanian. It was co-produced by Kosovo, Switzerland, Albania and North Macedonia.
[38] *Luaneshat e Kodrës* as originally named in Albanian. It was co-produced by France and Kosovo.
[39] Vera Andrron Detin as originally name in Albanian. It was co-produced by Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia.

received awards and recognition at major FIPRESCI-affiliated festivals, most notably the Venice Film Festival. *The Flying Circus* has won War on Screen International Film Festival in France and premiered internationally in Tallinn Film Festival. Furthermore, this so-called black comedy has been included due to the fact that it is a film that directly addresses the context of the Kosovo war.

We specifically focused on feature films to allow for an in-depth and well-defined characterization of the protagonists and topics. For this reason, successful short films such as *Displaced* (2021, Dir.: Samir Karahoda) were not included. We are also aware that other noteworthy films, such as *Zana* (2019, Dir.: Antoneta Kastrati) or *Looking for Venera* (2022, Dir.: Norika Sefa), could have been considered for our corpus. However, for feasibility reasons, we decided to limit our analysis to six films. Below, we provide a brief synopsis of each selected film:

The Marriage explores the complexities of love, identity, and societal expectations in Kosovo. The film follows Anita and Bekim, a seemingly happy couple preparing for their wedding. However, when Bekim's long-lost friend and former lover, Nol, returns, unresolved emotions resurface, challenging Bekim's commitment and highlighting the difficulties of LGBTQ+ individuals in a conservative society.

The Flying Circus follows four Kosovar actors from Prishtina in the late 1990s who, inspired by the British comedian troupe Monty Python, embark on a risky journey to Albania to perform at a theatre festival in Tirana. As they cross tense borders and face absurd obstacles, the film reflects on art as resistance and the desire for self-expression in a country on the verge of war.

Exile follows Xhafer, a Kosovar-Albanian living in Germany who works as a scientist in a lab. He grows paranoid that his colleagues are discriminating against him. His German wife dismisses his fears, while his affair with an Albanian woman adds to his identity crisis. As his isolation deepens, the film explores xenophobia, assimilation, and the blurred lines between perception and reality.

Hive is based on a true story and follows Fahrije, a widow who, after her husband is missing in the Kosovo War,[40] starts a small business alongside other widows to provide for their families. Facing societal backlash for challenging traditional gender roles, she perseveres, symbolizing women's empowerment and the ongoing struggle for economic independence in patriarchal societies.

The Hill Where Lionesses Roar portrays the aspirations and frustrations of young women in Kosovo. The film follows three teenage girls trapped in a small village with limited opportunities. Longing for freedom and self-determination, they form a rebellious pact that leads to both liberating and tragic consequences—especially after their failure to gain admission to university.

Vera Dreams of the Sea examines themes of inheritance, patriarchal traditions, and female agency. Vera, a middle-aged sign language interpreter, faces an existential crisis after her husband's sudden suicide. As she discovers hidden family secrets and legal battles over property, Vera must navigate a system designed to disempower women, ultimately reclaiming her autonomy in a male-dominated society.

4. Data collection and analysis

We use a total of 9 hours and 42 minutes of film material complemented by semi-structured interviews, to inform our analysis. Unlike historiographic methods that privilege oral sources as primary, this approach considers the film texts as primary data and the interviews as secondary interpretive material. This inversion reflects the logic of discourse analysis, where the main object of study is not factual history but the cultural construction of meaning.

In the first part of our analysis, we use generative semiotic models to identify five thematic categories embedded in the films' narrative structures and value systems: (1) women's empowerment, (2) the conflictive past and relations with Serbia, (3) emigration, (4) local traditions and religion, and (5) the landscape as both a touristic and symbolic asset. In the second part, we asked the film directors to reflect on these same categories.

[40] There are still 1,595 people missing in Kosovo, according to independent sources. See Kurtic, Tesija & Isufi (2024).

This dual approach allows us to interpret the material from two perspectives: a subjective reading—our own analysis, shaped by our positions as both insiders and outsiders, and by gendered experiences—and the directors' own intentions in constructing the cinematic representation of the Self.

5. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This research is subject to several limitations. Firstly, due to a lack of reliable data on box office revenue, budgets, and distribution earnings, these economic factors were not used as criteria for film selection or evaluation. Secondly, the corpus analyzed represents a non-representative sample of Kosovar cinema; it reflects emerging trends rather than the full scope of contemporary production.

Thirdly, interviews were limited to film directors, leaving out key industry voices such as producers and distributors. Additionally, this study focused on narrative analysis and not on the industrial conditions of production, nor on audience reception. A comprehensive study of the film industry would require a different methodological framework, including discourse analysis of reviews, focus groups, or interviews with viewers.

From an ethical standpoint, we approached the films with respect for the filmmakers' voices while maintaining critical independence. Statements made by directors were considered contextually but did not override our textual analysis of the films. In addition, we asked the filmmakers questions based on the categories we identified. While this could be seen as a form of 'lip-reading,' we, as analysts, interpret meaning—and ultimately, credibility lies in the eye of the beholder.

Lastly, this study does not attempt to define what it means to be Kosovar or to deconstruct the national identity of Kosovo. Rather, it investigates how Kosovarness is performed and projected through storylines, characters, and visual narratives in contemporary cinema.

All reflections and findings are the result of the authors' independent analysis. The writing has been closely supervised and shaped to reflect their individual voices. Any remaining errors are solely our responsibility.

II- **FILM ANALYSIS**

Each category of this section is divided into two parts: first, our perspective as viewers—how we perceive the films and the representation of the Self through them (The Way We See It: A Viewer's Perspective); and second, the filmmakers' perspective—how they present and interpret their own work and the concept of the Self (The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective). It also includes a comparative reflection on the differences and intersections between these two viewpoints. Overall, the results suggest that there is no significant difference between how it is perceived from both perspectives.

1: Women empowerment

The Way We See It: A Viewer's Perspective

The most salient category is women empowerment. Kosovo's post war cinema builds the stories of the past through women. Most of these films are directed by women. Main protagonists are women actresses. One can see how stories are told with women's heads. In general, in all the analyzed movies, women are framed (through their main protagonists) with resistance and not as victims. They fight will all means, throughs stones in windows after their car was broken (*Hive*), starts a business, push the car and form a gang (*The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*). In a patriarchal environment, they fought to claim their equal share *(Vera Dreams the Sea).*

After having watched almost ten hours of material, there are some commonalities that we have discovered that show the strength of women, women driving (1), their interpersonal and sexual relations with men (2), and independence and inheritance (3). Certainly, there are additional micro-level aspects, but due to the scope of this study, we focus only on these specific aspects.

In the films, women are not only key characters but are also depicted driving cars. Historically, women have been absent from such depictions, both in Kosovo and globally. While driving has often symbolized freedom for men, women have been tasked with considering their ineptitude, responsibilities to their families, and vulnerability when behind the wheel.[41] The ability to drive became a symbol of women's independence, though acceptance varied by country, influenced by legal, cultural, and social factors. In 1888, Bertha Benz made the first cross-country automobile journey, covering over 100 kilometers in Southern Germany, marking the first instance of driving an automobile for a significant distance.

In *The Marriage*, the main female character, Anita[42] drives the car, although there are scenes where it is implied that her husband, Bekim[43] is behind the wheel. Fahrije, the

[41] Parkin (2017).
[42] Played by Ardiana Matoshi.
[43] Played by Alban Ukaj.

character from *Hive*, is also shown driving and getting her driving license becomes one of the main struggles of the film. Similarly, in *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar* the teenage girls —Qe,[44] Jeta,[45] and Li[46]— form a gang and engage in petty crime while eagerly awaiting the opportunity to go away to university and escape the monotony of their small-town life. They eventually steal a car and drive around (also with their new one). Additionally, in *Vera Dreams of the Sea*, Vera,[47] in her 50s, is depicted driving in a movie that addresses the issue of inheritance, among other themes. There is also a scene where the women's organization is offering free driving courses, and women seem interested to learn despite their age. A woman asks, if the teacher is a man or a woman, but the representative of the women's organization explains that such question is not relevant, learning how to drive is more important in order to secure a job. In the film *The Flying Circus*, the actresses are passengers on a bus—they are not the ones driving. The supporting actresses do not appear in marginalized roles, but rather as professionals: a waitress, a police officer, and two journalists.

Another important aspect is related to interpersonal and sexual relations with men. Here, women are depicted in a diverse range of roles, reflecting their multifaceted identities and societal expectations. They appear as daughters, mothers, friends, lovers, and widows—some of whom suppress their emotions, while others, particularly young widows, are expected to remarry. These women span different ages, from young to old, and come from both urban and rural settings.

In The Hill Where Lionesses Roar, the daughter *Qe* is depicted as having a strained relationship with her father. She shares a much closer bond with her younger sister, whom she encourages to pursue modeling. When Qe brings money home, it is her mother who tries to shield her from the father's outburst. He insults her with pejorative language, saying, "*This is what we do with girls like you*," as he forcibly removes her clothes, while the mother intervenes to protect her. Declaring, "*There's no place for b* in my house,"* he expresses concern on her morality and attempts to shame her into submission.

[44] Played by Flaka Latifi.
[45] Played by Urata Shabani.
[46] Played by Era Balaj.
[47] Played by Teuta Ajdini.

There is nuanced exploration of romantic and intimate relationships, often shaped by generational shifts, cultural expectations, and gender roles. While younger characters engage in romantic relationships more openly, older generations remain largely absent from such portrayals. Additionally, themes of independence, power dynamics, and grief further highlight the complexities of relationships in both local and diasporic contexts. In *The Marriage,* Anita met her (not-openly) gay husband while drinking with friends in a bar, suggesting that their encounter was a matter of personal choice. Although they are not married, they share an intimate relationship. The film also portrays discussions among female friends about dating men, reflecting a generational shift in attitudes toward relationships. However, this shift is contrasted with the older generation, as the film does not depict any intimate scenes involving Bekim's parents or other older couples. This distinction suggests an evolving cultural landscape in which younger generations engage in romantic relationships more openly than their predecessors.

In *Exile* cultural and gender dynamics are further emphasized through the contrast between local and foreign women. The supposed Kosovar woman is depicted as wearing a veil, not speaking German, and working as a cleaning lady. She[48] engages in an extramarital affair with the main protagonist, Xhafer,[49] a Kosovo-born pharmaceutical engineer who becomes paranoid and plunges into an identity crisis. Xhafer, in contrast, is fluent in German and holds a higher professional position, which implies a higher position in social scale. Meanwhile, the Kosovar woman back home remains largely silent in her marital relationship, performing traditional roles such as serving tea. In contrast, the German wife Nora[50] is portrayed as more independent: pursuing a PhD and taking an active role in childcare. However, despite her independence, she fears her husband, as he becomes physically abusive, at one point grabbing her throat.

In *Vera Dreams of the Sea*, Vera, a 64-year-old sign language interpreter, is portrayed as more independent than her sister-in-law, who resides in a village. The film does not present Vera's relationship with her husband, Fatmir, in an intimate manner. However, her daughter Sara's relationship with her boyfriend is depicted as more romantic, with the boyfriend even taking on a caregiving role for Sara's daughter. This contrast

[48] Played by Flonja Kodheli.
[49] Played by Mišel Matičević.
[50] Played by Sanra Hüller.

underscores evolving gender roles, where younger women experience more agency in their relationships compared to older generations.

In *Hive*, Fahrije[51] experiences a profound transformation following the loss of her husband. She refrains from pursuing another romantic relationship and even begins dressing in a more masculine manner, visually representing her grief and she is framed as someone that does not laugh. She ostensibly claims that *"our husbands would have remarried after a month and with women younger than us"* while she keeps her wedding ring. In one scene, a man in the village attempts to kiss her forcibly, but she resists. Being in her thirties she is depicted as someone whose intimacy with men is gone. In background some women talk and tease each other about relations with men, and suggest some young ones to marry. At the same time, women are reminded to 'shush' potentially someone will listen and it would be shameful.

> *"Tell us when you became bride [indicating that groom and bride did not know each other before]"…*
> *…"I was afraid to touch him, the poor would have fallen down, but he was also afraid of me because I appeared tall… I had heels on…fortunately the windows were closed because otherwise he would have jumped out of the window."*
>
> *(Hive, extract from the movie).*

In *Hive*, Fahrije's relationship with her father-in-law is portrayed as deeply respectful, taking care of him and washing him, and despite being in a wheelchair, he retains an authoritative presence within the family. In *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar,* Li shares an intimate relationship with Zem,[52] while Qe forms a deep, romantic bond with her friend Jeta. The connection between the three female characters is portrayed as so powerful—resembling a form of sorority—that it transcends even romantic or sexual intimacy. The three girls seek independence –financial, societal, moral. They do not worry about what others think of them, they attempt to make changes. They start with education, but only after failing and demonstrating protest they start to steal.

[51] Played by Yllka Gashi.
[52] Played by Andi Bajgora.

In *The Flying Circus*, the relationship between Kushtrim[53] and Jeta[54] is depicted as relatively balanced in terms of authority. Although Jeta is the one caring for their child—feeding and changing the baby—she also voices her concerns and exercises agency, particularly when expressing her unease about Kushtrimi's plan to travel to Albania. The other character, Donat,[55] picks up his daughter and ties her shoes, demonstrating a caring, parental approach. The film does not portray a rigid gender hierarchy, offering instead a more equitable relational dynamic. Women in secondary roles also undergo development, particularly the two women journalists who emerge more prominently in the latter part of the film. This contributes to the theme of women's empowerment, which we categorize as part of the film's broader engagement with "the Other." The portrayal of women characters—who are professional, assertive, and nuanced—suggests a deliberate effort to move beyond simplistic gender tropes. In the topic about women, an important aspect is the issue of property inheritance and women's independence, which is central to understanding the theme of women's empowerment across the films. In *Vera Dreams the Sea*, the core of the topic is inheritance, along with deaf community.

The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective

According to Blerta Basholli,[56] director of *Hive* and based in Prishtina, driving is a sign of empowerment, and they tried to use it in the film as well "*because when she [in real life, Fahriije Hoti] took the driving license, life changed for that woman and also for men it was seen as they've got too much freedom…you are taking too many things in control*". The driving is connected to freedom of women, and that sort of act allows to be judged on her morality since "widows were expected not to show interest in anything", adds the director.

When it comes to relations with men, Blerta Basholli explains that women had to stop any possible intimate relation.

> *"For Fahrije[57] and those women whose husbands are missing, talking to men is like giving them a chance into something more. They had to be very careful*

[53] Played by Armend Smajli.
[54] Played by May-Linda Kosumovic.
[55] Played by Afrim Muçaj.
[56] Interview conducted in March, 2025.
[57] Blerta refers to Fahrije Hoti from the real-life story, not just the film, since the movie is based on true event.

and Fahrije was. She lived like men, wearing short hair, dressing like a man, so that she does not give any sign of interest, which is pretty sad, because all of these women were young. And, of course they needed partners and they need it to pursue their lives."

Blerta Basholli.

In the movie *Vera Dreams of the Sea*, according to Kaltrina Krasniqi, Vera's journey is one of resistance against societal structures that seek to define and confine her position. For the director, Krasniqi, the film—led by a female protagonist—portrays strategies of survival and resistance within an oppressive environment, reflecting an ongoing quest for autonomy. She frames her character and the character's decisions in a way that challenges traditional gender expectations and defies the structures of power that have historically sidelined women. Like Kaltrina Krasniqi, film producer Valbona Rrahmani does not place particular emphasis on driving as such. Instead, she sees each of the young female protagonists as defined by a strong personality and a refusal to accept the fatality of their circumstances.

Seeing themselves as fully alive, they act in survival mode. In a way, what drives these young women is simply the desire to live—and that's why they set no limits for themselves. "*If we consider that the empowerment of women is about breaking down barriers, it is clear that our young protagonists almost make this their way of thinking*," adds Rrahmani, producer of *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*, based in Paris, France.

According to film director and responsible of the Kosovo Cinematography Center, Blerta Zeqiri, it tells the story of "the passage from oral law to written law".[58] The movie demonstrated the societal struggles of women to get the inheritance they legally obtain but the patriarchal tradition wants to prohibit them, and instead male cousins are the only ones to inherit. Vera has only one daughter and her husband's family attempts to take her house in the village. The elderly in the village attempt to 'threaten' and educate Vera about who should get the house. She struggles and ultimately gives up.

The character of Anita in the film *Marriage* is caught in a situation where she is unable to decide. According to director Blerta Zeqiri, she felt a strong sense of responsibility

[58] Interview conducted on March, 2025.

toward Anita's character but ultimately had to shift the narrative focus to the two male characters. "*I had to leave Anita behind, because when she was present, the audience couldn't fully empathize with both men. I believe viewers still perceive her as a hostage to the situation"* Zeqiri explains. For Zeqiri, it was also important to reflect on how women's roles have evolved over the past 20 years. She notes that while it was once common to see only young women driving, now even older women are learning—symbolizing a shift toward greater independence. "Independence is very important, and the state is actively trying to support this" Zeqiri concludes, emphasizing the broader context of women's empowerment.

2: Emigration issues

The Way We See It: A Viewer's Perspective

As happens across the Balkans, Kosovo's resident population is declining. As of May 2024, the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS) reported a resident population of 1.6 million, which implies an 8,8% decrease since the last report in 2011[59]. Data from Kosovars abroad vary from 400,000[60] to 600,000,[61] which may constitute a 25-35% of total citizenry. It is not a novelty, then, to stress that a huge part of Kosovar belonging is built abroad. A good example of this is how passionately Kosovars follow the results of the Swiss national football team after the allegiance to Kosovo's symbols by sportspeople with Kosovo-Albanian backgrounds like Granit Xhaka or Xherdan Shaqiri. However, the conational living abroad can be also 'otherized' by locals. As scholar Dafina Paca concludes in her study of the stereotypes around the term 'schatzi', Kosovo-Albanians living in Switzerland and Germany.

> "*We have worked hard in host countries and have earned good incomes and accumulated wealth that has played an important role in the form of remittances. However, on the other hand, this 'cash cow' element of the 'schatzi[62]' discourse has not necessarily translated into positive social*

[59] Bajrami & Semini (2024).
[60] KOHA (2024).
[61] Sarajevo Times (2024)
[62] In English it means treasure.

> *status for the diaspora. (…) [Differently to the UK-based Kosovo Albanian diaspora,] the 'schatzi' more generally are represented as lacking cultural advancement and social capital, failing to climb the social ladder in their western host countries".* [63]

What Paca describes in her analysis matches perfectly the biggest issue in the film *Exile*. Xhafer holds a relatively privileged position in his workplace as a pharmaceutical engineer. However, he is constantly trapped in a cycle of perceived persecution and self-imposed isolation, shaped by a deep-seated sense of ethnic inferiority. The film, presented entirely from Xhafer's perspective, masterfully manipulates pacing, imagery, and music to sustain ambiguity until the very end—leaving us uncertain about the reality of his victimization. It remains unclear whether Xhafer's workplace harassment is genuinely inflicted by his colleagues or if it stems from his paranoia and fragile mental health.

From a narrative standpoint, this ambiguity is ultimately irrelevant. As the film progresses, Xhafer withdraws further into isolation, finding solace only in his relationship with his Albanian lover, a cleaner from a lower socio-educational background. His growing tensions with his German wife, Nora—who urges him to stop victimizing himself and to focus on their newborn—further reinforce his alienation. The film powerfully portrays Xhafer's increasing sense of foreignness within a highly homogenized professional environment. This paradox lies at the heart of *Exile*. Unlike the stereotypical *Gastarbeiter*[64]—the unskilled Eastern European worker seeking a better future in Germany—Xhafer is a highly qualified professional. His economic stability contrasts sharply with his emotional vulnerability and precarious social connections: he has no close family, no friends, and does not feel he can trust his wife. His Albanian lover becomes his only anchor in a world that feels increasingly hostile, to the point that he turns up at her home in sheer desperation. Ultimately, the film serves as a compelling exploration of the psychological toll of migration—how it blurs identities and erodes a sense of ontological security. However, Xhafer's despair contrasts starkly with the resilience of his Albanian lover. Despite lacking the professional and social privileges he enjoys; she navigates the challenges of migration with far greater emotional stability. This

[63] Paca (2020, p. 14)
[64] In English, the term refers to migrants who worked temporarily, primarily during the 1960s and 1970s, and often came from Yugoslavia.

contrast raises a fundamental question: does *Exile* suggest that losing social privileges—transitioning from a respected scientist in one's home country to just another foreigner abroad—poses a greater psychological challenge than migration itself?

A similar exploration of migration can be found in *The Marriage*, where the character of Nol embodies a different kind of displacement—intellectual "exile" in France. Nol experiences dual marginalization in Kosovo: he cannot freely live out of his artistic vocation, and his identity as a homosexual isolates him in a conservative society. His migrant status also serves as a narrative device, explaining his prolonged absence and his seemingly incidental return to a country with which he feels little emotional connection.

Unlike Xhafer, Nol appears to have found fulfillment in Paris. He describes it as a city that embraces his intellectual pursuits, provides him with financial stability as an artist, and accepts his sexual identity. However, this is merely what he tells Bekim and Anita. The film does not show his daily life in France, nor does it explain why he returns to Pristina after so many years. One cannot help but wonder: if *The Marriage* were told from his perspective in Paris, would it depict an idyllic existence, or would it reveal the struggles of an immigrant artist? Similarly, if *Exile* were told from Xhafer's imagined escape to Kosovo, would he continue to frame his German experience as tragic, or would he downplay his struggles in favor of economic and professional success stories?

In this regard, while *Exile* presents migration as a disorienting and distressing experience, and *The Marriage* portrays it as liberating, the true complexity lies in their interplay. Both films suggest that migration entails a deep sense of loss and homesickness. However, depending on the narrative perspective, its negative aspects may be downplayed, or its positive aspects exaggerated. This adds nuance to the stereotype of the *Schatzi*—the migrant who highlights economic success in the host country to elevate (often unsuccessfully) their social status back home. Rather than mere self-promotion, this could be interpreted as a psychological defense mechanism against the trauma of migration.

In *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*, Lena[65] mentions that she is visiting from France, subtly highlighting the contrast between "*here*" (Kosovo) and "*there*" (abroad). When she says, "I love the celebrations here," she is referring to Kosovo, yet when asked where she lives, she responds, "I'm from France"—distancing herself from the local context. She is in Kosovo only for vacation, and her Albanian, spoken with a French accent, is portrayed as a charming marker of difference. When asked the cliché question "Is it better here or there?", a question that is often asked to Albanians who live abroad when they visit Kosovo— Lena smiles and says "here" (Kosovo), though she struggles to articulate why. She adds that in France, "*you have things to do—there are theaters*," to which Jeta replies, "*We also go to the theater here*." The conversation ultimately becomes a kind of conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of each place. On one side, there is France—a country where the future must be carefully planned, often accompanied by intense social and personal pressure. On the other, there is Kosovo, where many young people experience isolation and a lack of options, particularly due to restrictions like the historical absence of visa liberalization, now surpassed. The overall tone of the exchange is more philosophical than comparative, suggesting that it is difficult to determine where life is truly better or happier, as each place presents its own unique set of challenges. The world that separates the girls living in a Kosovar village from Lena, who lives in Paris, is not merely geographic but psychological—a difference in state of mind and solitude. While Lena expresses fear and uncertainty about her own happiness, she also envies the other girls for the freedom and deep friendship they share. Through Lena's character, the film also challenges stereotypes about Albanian migrants. She appears intellectually engaged, reading French feminist philosophy, which counters the common trope of Albanians living abroad without pursuing an intellectual or reflective life. As mentioned, their conversation brings up the theme of isolation, as the other girls reveal they have never left the country and attribute this to the lack of visa liberalization.[66] They describe this restriction as feeling like a prison. Lena, meanwhile, draws attention to the social pressures faced by young women, adding another layer to the sense of confinement—even for those who return from abroad.

In *The Flying Circus*, there is phone conversation between Fatmir and a friend who has presumably abroad. When Fatmir asks, "Where are you?" the friend replies, "In Zurich."

[65] Played by Luàna Bajrami.

[66] At the time, Kosovars still required visas to travel to the EU.

The contrast is striking—the friend talks casually about skiing, while Fatmir and his group are anxiously facing the uncertainty of whether a war is about to begin in Kosovo. By contrast, the other three films—*Hive, Vera Dreams of the Sea,* do not engage in significant reflections on migration, at least not in the context of migration to a foreign country. Instead, they explore tensions between rural and urban life, but without positioning migration trauma as a collective experience embodied by specific characters

The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective

Migration is not a theme that features prominently in the narrative planning of the films, according to their creators. The film that addresses the topic most explicitly is *Exile*. However, its director, Visar Morina,[67] clarifies that "*it is more about how the Other [is] trying to get integrated into a group (...) and more about group insecurity than about a guy from Kosovo or a guy from another place*." In other words, the film explores the challenges of a global migrant –or, more generally speaking, an outsider– rather than focusing on nostalgia or longing for a homeland left behind. Xhafer's struggle, as Morina explains, is "*to fight so much to have a seat that once you get it, you are afraid to lose it*," suggesting that his situation is not representative of the broader Kosovar diaspora, particularly given his privileges within a highly skilled professional environment.

In *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*, producer Valbona Rahmani[68] notes that migration is associated with a desire to escape from a stagnant environment, embodied in the character of Lena. She stated: "*It is above all the theme of the foreign, the 'elsewhere', that emerges. She represents a link to the unknown, and questions arise in response to the doubts she carries within herself, because she ultimately becomes a mirror that prompts us to ask whether emancipation is a matter of place, individuality, or perception*."

[67] Interview conducted in March, 2025.
[68] Interview replied via email in March, 2025.

3: Conflictive past and relations with Serbs

The Way We See It: A Viewer's Perspective

Three films in our corpus explore the theme of war through the reference with Serbia. In *The Marriage*, a flashback scene set during the war portrays the characters Nol and Bekim, who, despite the chaos and fear of the surrounding environment, find solace in each other's company. The scene is framed by their concern for the lives lost in the conflict without blame discourse. In the context of the 'us versus them' division, the phrase "they" refers to the Serbs and saying that "they are killing 'us'". While the "us" is not limited to the Albanians. Instead, "us" evolves to represent both groups, suggesting that violence could have been directed at them from either side if their relationship as a gay couple had been discovered. This notion is highlighted in their conversation:

> *"If the Serbs were not killing us, I would always want to live like this… Our people would kill us too... Why ours? War or not, my mother would execute us first... The only thing that would unite Serbs and Albanians would be to eradicate us."*
>
> *The Marriage, extract from the film.*

In the same scene the term "Serbs" is played with through the pejorative use of "skije" as a derogatory form of referring to the Serbian community. Another scene that references the war is the trauma experienced by the people through the topic of the missing. This theme begins in the movie *The Marriage*, where the older man Mixha Musë[69] tells Bekim, without explicitly using such term, that six of his family members are "missing" (among them, his two sons, his brother). The scene is cold and filled with waiting. "They" refers to the missing people, but she did not find them. As she waits, she expresses how devastated she feels and how she must keep waiting for the remaining. She wants to move "forward."

Hive opens with the topic of missing people. Fahrije goes to verify the remains, while in the background, women shout as one of them is about to pass out. The main protagonist is trying to identify the remains of her husband. The scene then shows a protest in front

[69] Played by Bislam Mucaj.

of a governmental building, highlighting the lack of support in finding "our loved ones." The missing people include children, men, and wives.

We consider that the film that most explicitly addresses the region's troubled past and its relationship with Serbia is *The Flying Circus*. One of its distinguishing features is its temporal setting—just days before the outbreak of the Kosovo War. While the film avoids stating specific dates, the narrative clearly unfolds in a pre-war atmosphere, marked by four key moments. In this way, the conflict is not treated as recent memory but rather as a present condition embedded in the characters' storyline. Nevertheless, as with the other two cases, it would be inaccurate to classify *The Flying Circus* as a war film—perhaps anti-war in tone—because the war itself is not the central dramatic element; instead, it is the looming possibility of war that shapes the protagonists' reality. The film's four narrative moments can be identified as: (1) the everyday life of the Albanian community in Kosovo, (2) the challenge of crossing the border into Albania, (3) the opportunity to tell the world what is happening in Kosovo, and (4) the film's conclusion, which directly addresses the imminence of war.

The first moment is conveyed through two key scenes: children attending school in private Albanian homes—a phenomenon deeply embedded in the Albanian-Kosovar memoryscape of the 1990s—and a scene in which a Serb bursts into a venue where Albanians are celebrating and threatens them with a weapon. These episodes depict a complex environment marked by fear, intimidation, and clearly defined social hierarchies, where Albanians resort to creative solutions to mitigate or navigate their symbolic disadvantage in the face of Serbian de facto power. The second moment takes place during the bus journey to Montenegro, where the Serbian federal police act as a threshold that must be crossed to proceed. As a road trip film, *The Flying Circus* presents obstacles and threats as situational or institutional barriers on the path to Tirana, the destination where the characters are to perform their play. Uncertainty reemerges when the group is asked by a police officer to state their professions, and one of them, Donat, tells the truth ("*We are actors")* even though the official does not believe him and let them pass the same. The third moment of dramatic tension centers around the role of the media as either catalysts or pacifiers of conflict, at a time when the escalation of war remains uncertain. A double dynamic of testimony and protagonism unfolds, drawing the four main characters into a debate about the most appropriate stance to adopt for the

benefit of Kosovo. On the one hand, they begin to recognize the rising tensions through the Albanian media in Tirana; on the other, they see a historic opportunity to become the voices denouncing the cultural apartheid experienced by Kosovo Albanians. This is where the role of the Albanian journalist and the second journalist—purportedly Italian—becomes crucial, as they represent the international community's attention. A strategic internal debate emerges among the group: Fatmir voluntarily shares his experiences of isolation and persecution with the media, while Kushtrim rebukes him, insisting that they must present a unified stance—either speak up or remain silent—considering potential reprisals from Yugoslav authorities that could affect their families. The dilemma, as with the bus scene, is resolved by telling the truth. When Leka declares, "*Let's tell them the truth, dammit. No matter what happens. I'm tired*," it becomes evident that, as in other films analyzed, honesty and resilience—not cynicism—enable the characters to achieve their goals while taking responsibility in the face of adversity. In any case, none of the protagonists seeks to play the role of victim before the media. On the contrary, they aim to use the media strategically to achieve their goal: reaching Michael Palin and persuading the British actor to attend their play at the National Auditorium.

Finally, in the film's closing scenes, as the inevitability of armed conflict with Serbia becomes clear—though never explicitly stated—the characters' personal stories intertwine with their individual destinies. Kushtrim is the only one who returns to Kosovo to reunite with his family. Donat implies he will remain in Albania to join the Kosovo Liberal Army (*Ushtrima Çlirimatre e Kosoves*) and participate in the armed resistance. Leka continues his romantic relationship with Jonila,[70] the Albanian journalist who also serves as a potential informational bridge to the world. Meanwhile, a romantic/intellectual bond is suggested between Fatmir[71] and Ana Skutari,[72] the Italo-Albanian journalist.

The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective

The filmmakers interviewed whose works engage with the conflict involving Serbia unanimously agree that the decision not to place the war at the center of their narratives is both an aesthetic and ethical one. Their intention was to shift the focus toward other dimensions of human experience. In this regard, the most explicit position is that of

[70] Played by Christ Lleshi.
[71] Played by Shpëtim Selmani.
[72] Played by Estela Pysqyli.

Valbona Rahmani (*The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*), who states: "*The film does not address the country's history in any way. Its very essence is deliberately neutral—both geographically and temporally—in order to focus entirely on the emotional state of a youth caught between desires, ambitions, and traditions*."

With some nuance, Kaltrina Krasniqi acknowledges that the legacy of conflict serves as a contextual backdrop in *Vera Dreams of the Sea*. While the film

> "*It does not directly address the historical conflict between Kosovo and Serbia, its portrayal of a society still grappling with the lingering effects of that past is unmistakable. The film subtly reflects the deep institutional mistrust and socio-political divisions that continue to mark the lives of many Kosovars, particularly those in marginalized communities. While these themes are not the central focus of the narrative, they form an underlying current that influences the character's arc.*"[73]

Similarly, Blerta Zeqiri emphasizes that her film *The Marriage* does not articulate a discourse of hatred toward Serbia and "*not even revenge, in a way*." She explains, "*I wanted to focus on how situations can become against people [because] when you have something you don't like or you don't agree with, then, you don't know who the aggressor will be like*" referencing to the scene in which the two lovers suggest that Albanians and Serbs would only find common ground in oppressing gay people like them.

Along similar lines, director Blerta Basholli (*Hive*) stated that her goal was not to offer historical exposition but to avoid replicating narratives of hatred: "In *these kinds of films, I didn't see the point of expressing hatred. I think that the film sent a bigger message to the world without talking about [the war]*." Basholli emphasized that she aimed to connect with audiences through shared human emotions rather than through sociopolitical frameworks: "*Audiences connect as humans to humans, without thinking where this is happening. People connect more when they can see themselves in the characters. That's really important to me. I tried to give hope a chance, rather than putting a finger on blaming*."

[73] Interview was conducted in March 2025.

4: The role of religion and cultural tradition

The Way We See It: A Viewer's Perspective

As a general assumption, it seems that all movies have in common they propose a secular standpoint since the question of religion is absent in most of them. In *The Hill Where The Lionesses Roar* the sound of praying is heard in the background, and there are some mosques in the infrastructure. But the girls drink alcohol, as well as in *The Marriage*, where there are several scenes where girls drink beer and get drunk as a part of the unmarked social landscape. In *Hive*, mosques, churches and houses are framed in the village of Janjevo/Janjevë although the film is set in Krusha. One notices that the names of the people are not secularized; they remain the same, but religious rituals are not depicted in the movies.

In *The Flying Circus*, religion emerges as a subtle yet significant trope, offering more depth than initially apparent and offering multiple versions of secularity. We see that the play they were supposed to play in Albania is about Catholic nuns as characters, thus, making fun of religion and paying tribute to the absurd humor of Monty Python itself. Despite the mention that the characters are Albanian and presumably Muslim, they are shown drinking raki. One secondary character, Kristo[74] stands out as particularly important for this analysis. He embodies the intersection of religion, tradition, and secular identity. His name alone signals a Christian heritage, yet his interactions reflect a shared Albanian identity that transcends religious boundaries. Notably, he gives a rosary to one of the main characters (Leka) symbolizing a continuity of cultural and communal bonds based not on faith, but on language and shared experience. This gesture emphasizes the film's broader theme: that Albanian identity is rooted less in religion and more in a shared linguistic and cultural framework. The main characters from Kosovo—Kushtrim, Jeta, Fatmir—are all portrayed as secular, further reinforcing this idea of a post-religious or culturally inclusive Albanian identity.

The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective

In The Hill Where Lionesses Roar, it becomes clear that the film intentionally avoids taking a religious angle. The visual presence of mosques and the sound of prayer are

[74] Played by Armand Morina.

included as part of the setting—they are purely contextual, much like churches in rural French landscapes. The director, Luàna Bajrami, seems particularly attentive to natural imagery and sound. "*She treats these elements almost as characters in their own right*", says the producer Valbona Rrahmani about the sounds in the movies. According to her, the same applies to the traditional wedding scene, which becomes a suspended moment for the protagonists—a space where they allow themselves to be carried by the energy of the ritual. In the movie *Marriage* and *Vera Dreams the Sea,* non-religion appears through secular character names, not framing religious identity nor elements. According to Blerta Zeqiri, it is not religion but tradition that doesn't let them be free the way they want to, referring to their sexuality. Similarly, according to Kaltrina Krasniqi, the tension in *Vera Dreams of the Sea* does not rely particularly with one religion: it is between traditional values and the evolving realities of modern life. For Visar Morina, *Exile* is secularized, there was even a deleted scene about the question of the food. In similar terms, Blerta Basholli states that in *Hive* religion is not the primary marker of unification, it is the civic identity through the state that connects her, since "religion was never dividing us, and we were Albanians before everything and this is something I grew up with and I am very proud with", point to that Basholli.

5: Filmmaking as placemaking

The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective

Contrary to our initial hypothesis—and to what is often observed in other European media ecosystems—landscape does not emerge in these films as a central protagonist in the narrative, nor is it portrayed as an asset to be exploited for tourism or soft power purposes. Anyone familiar with Kosovo's geography knows the natural beauty of its features: vast green valleys, snow-covered peaks in winter, abundant rivers, rustic villages with centuries-old traditions, and exceptional hiking trails in spring and summer. The territory of Kosovo has substantial potential to offer the world an alternative image to the war-torn stereotype. Yet, in many Latin American countries, the expression "this looks like Kosovo" is still used to describe chaotic, destroyed places lacking infrastructure and prospects—an image far removed from today's reality: Kosovo is a young country, with a vibrant population and a landscape yet to be discovered by the tourist masses who now flock to the Adriatic coast, especially in Croatia and increasingly in Albania. The central

question in this section, then, is: What kind of narrative about Kosovo's territory do the films in our corpus construct? Each film proposes a slightly different axis of oppositions. Three of them clearly articulate a discourse that contrasts rural Kosovo with urban (or suburban) Kosovo, though the value assigned to each varies.

Hive reclaims the dignity of rural Kosovar women, not necessarily in opposition to the city, but in resistance to the conservative and oppressive forces within the rural environment itself. This is a narrative of rural-feminist intersectionality. The challenge faced by the women in the "ajvar" cooperative is twofold: on the one hand, they must confront the patriarchy embedded in the very system they rely on to produce—facing threats such as stones thrown at their car or sexual harassment from a pepper supplier. On the other hand, they must learn the logic of the market—and therefore of the urban world—to make their business viable. The role of the supermarket manager becomes crucial here: he genuinely wants to help, advising them to adopt a labeling system and promote the product beyond its artisanal quality. Perhaps the core message of *Hive*, regarding the rural-urban tension, is a search for balance: embracing the authenticity of rural life while understanding the industrial dynamics of the modern world. The protagonists do not blindly reject market rules or insist that their product "sells itself." Instead, they learn about branding and marketing on the go, ultimately achieving a sustainable model for producing and selling "ajvar"[75]—remaining true to their cooperative's principles while also adapting to the demands of the marketplace.

A slightly different approach is taken in *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar*, where the rural environment also frames the protagonists' actions, but solutions emerge from within—from their creativity and resistance to the lack of opportunities inherent in their surroundings. Whereas *Hive* seeks to escape rural conservatism, *The Hill Where Lionesses Roar* aims to "hack" peripheral subalternity from the inside: through petty crimes, by defying symbolic authorities, and through acts of rebellion.

In contrast, other films exalt the urban setting as integral to the characters' dignity. In *Vera Dreams of the Sea*, the rural/urban divide is not economic but institutional. Vera lives and works in Pristina, and her profession—sign language interpreter for the national

[75] roasted red peppers.

television—ties her closely to the ethos of the Kosovar republic. This urban anchoring renders her unfamiliar with the informal power dynamics at play in the countryside, where oral tradition still dominates. In this context, landscape is not an ally in her struggle to reclaim inheritance rights over a rural house; instead, it becomes a hostile space where unpredictability and absence are experienced as threats. Similarly, *The Marriage* is set almost entirely in Pristina, abandoning any romanticized portrayal of rural Kosovo. The main scenes take place in bars, private homes, wedding venues, and the airport. Even the city's outskirts are depicted as hostile, as seen in the scene where Bekim expels Anita from the car, and she is forced to walk back alone. In fact, *The Marriage* suggests that private space, rather than public, offers the ontological security and trust needed for characters to express their emotions authentically. This is evident in scenes such as Anita's conversation with a group of women about dresses, or the romantic moment between Nol and Bekim in their shared bedroom during the war. In other words, the film proposes intimacy as a refuge from the pressure and expectations imposed by the social landscape.

Set in the diaspora, *Exile* does not offer a celebratory narrative of Kosovo's landscape. Instead, it contrasts the supposed perfection of Xhafer's routine in Germany with his deep psychological isolation. The suburban house with its fenced yard and harmonious neighborhood sharply contrasts with his subjective experience of hostility, further deepening his existential crisis.

The Flying Circus offers a unique trajectory regarding the perception of Albanian territory. During their escape to Albania, both Kosovo and Montenegro —still controlled by Serbian/Montenegrin authorities—are portrayed as dangerous and filled with life-threatening obstacles. Upon crossing into Albania, one character (Leka) kisses the "national" soil, symbolizing a radical sense of identity and belonging. However, as the plot develops, the four actors encounter administrative hurdles and dubious characters—like the Albanian police officer—who do not appear as allies but as new obstacles in their mission to stage a play in Tirana. Along the way, they alternate between encounters with helpful figures (like Kristo and his brother who drive them in a truck) and others who dismiss or distrust them (such as Alfons, the festival organizer who initially excludes them from the official program). These experiences gradually challenge their idealized identification with Albanian identity and lead them toward a more nuanced understanding

of their own agency as Kosovars. In the film's final scenes, a new synthesis is achieved between their Kosovar agency and the Albanian setting. The ultimate reward is no longer framed in global aspirations—meeting Michael Palin, the international icon of absurdist comedy—but in winning the contest and facing the individual turning points that lie ahead as the Kosovo war becomes inevitable. Thus, rather than serving as a static backdrop or promotional asset, the Kosovar landscape functions as a narrative device that reflects, refracts, or challenges the inner worlds and trajectories of the protagonists. It is not the land that defines the characters, but the characters who re-signify the land through their actions, perceptions, and conflicts. This dynamic reveals an implicit cinematic refusal to romanticize or essentialize Kosovar territory; instead, the films construct a more fluid, contingent, and character-driven geography, one where place is never just setting, but always implication. By subverting conventional cinematic tropes that equate landscape with identity or nationhood, these films offer a more nuanced understanding of territory as a lived and negotiated experience—personal, political, and, above all, narrative.

The Way They Represent: A Filmmaker's Perspective

Consistent with our own observations, the directors did not emphasize landscape or the search for specific filming locations as a priority in the creative decisions behind their films. Blerta Basholli (*Hive*) stated: "*I am aware that Kosovo is very beautiful [but] for me what mattered was the story and not the landscape and showing Kosova*." Most of the other interviewees did not identify landscape as a meaningful element in generating cinematic settings for soft power projection, with the sole exception of Blerta Zeqiri, who spoke in her dual role as director of *The Marriage* and representative of the Kosovo Cinematography Center. In that second capacity, Zeqiri noted:

> *"We have a lot of potential for promoting tourism, among other assets. That's why we're going to give 30% of investment back to companies that come and film in Kosovo. Many countries do this, but it would be really, really good if Kosovo is seen by internationals as an opportunity and then it would become maybe also a touristic place. (...) Our new cinematographic law and our regulations are working for making Kosovo a place to be visited."*

6: Commonalities among filmmakers and film productions

Apart from the film analysis itself we have identified five patterns that dominate the contemporary Kosovo cinema landscape.

1: *Strong womanhood*: four out of six films analyzed were directed by women and in almost all films women developed key roles in producing teams. It is not a coincidence, then, that women empowerment emerged as one of the key observations during film analysis.

2: *Young creators taking the lead:* the average age of director is remarkably young, which demonstrate openness in the industry and eagerness to hear new voices.

3: Production amid COVID-times: the most fruitful period of our analysis coincides with the irruption of COVID, particularly during the year 2021.

4: *Albanian dialects*: there is a declared attempt to portray local accents to characters in Kosovar filmmaking, diversifying then the linguistic landscape of the films within the Albanosphere.

5: *Training/education abroad*: directors themselves have all been trained, educated or even lived for long periods overseas, which results in a better comprehension of the experiences related to migration. The places are UK, France, Germany and the United States, which are also the destinations of many Kosovo Albanian members of the diaspora.

III- CONCLUSIONS

What stories do Kosovar films tell?

Movies offer a great platform to understand Kosovo's public diplomacy because they provide external audiences with compelling stories about Kosovo's contemporary challenges through inspiring stories, complex characters, and rich plots. Kosovo's contemporary cinema landscape highlights little known aspects of Kosovar culture which, at the same time, catalyze internal social debates in an emergent society with young institutions that aims at consolidating a cultural canon.

In this section, we offer an interpretive framework for reading the films, drawing on a combination of the mapping of the categories above, analyzed following the matrix we proposed in the Introduction based on the Greimasian model of the semiotic square with a Goffmanian interpretation of how the Self is portrayed in the movies. As a general conclusion, while each film presents a unique narrative, they share a notable feature: all are directed by women or feature women in leading creative roles. Moreover, women are the central characters in all the films, with the exception of Exile.

1. Semiotic Mapping

This is a semiotic map of the corpus, which is divided in five different categories. Each number represents one category in the following way: while the color (green, blue, red, yellow, violet) represents the category the number (1-6) represents the film analyzed.

At the same, each corner/quadrant of the map represents different trends in analysis: while the *A* and *not B* (left side of the square) represent different modes of engaging with Kosovar agency, *the B* and *not A* show disengagement with Kosovo-themed narratives, at least in overt terms.

As we can see (Fig. 2), the semiotic square reveals that the films analyzed cover the full matrix in a complementary fashion: categories are not univocally mapped to specific themes, but rather intersect fluidly (each number can be present in different categories). For example, women empowerment overwhelmingly appears as a distinct trait of the Kosovar agency though in some cases is more related to state-related discourse (*Vera Dreams of the Seas*) while in others it is reflected as more individual or local trait (*The Marriage*, *Hive*). On the other hand, tradition and religion appear as more disengaged with the Self, thus, more linked to universal or othering claims. Thus, this flow allows us to assume that the Kosovar cinema is not defined by one category, but there are multiple moving flows, with a distinct nuanced, complex vision of what it means to be defined as a representation of Self. The Self is not defined by one identity element.

Similarly, the left half of the map reproduces the construction of a national or civic Albanian/Kosovar narrative, while the right side of the map relates to how the films dialogue with global or transnational themes. Kosovo appears not in isolation but in interaction with the world. Tradition and religion are reframed globally, not mythologized as folkloric. The type of wedding in *The Marriage*, the high-skilled work environment in *Exile*, and the pursuit of international representation in *The Flying Circus* are all examples of this international framing.

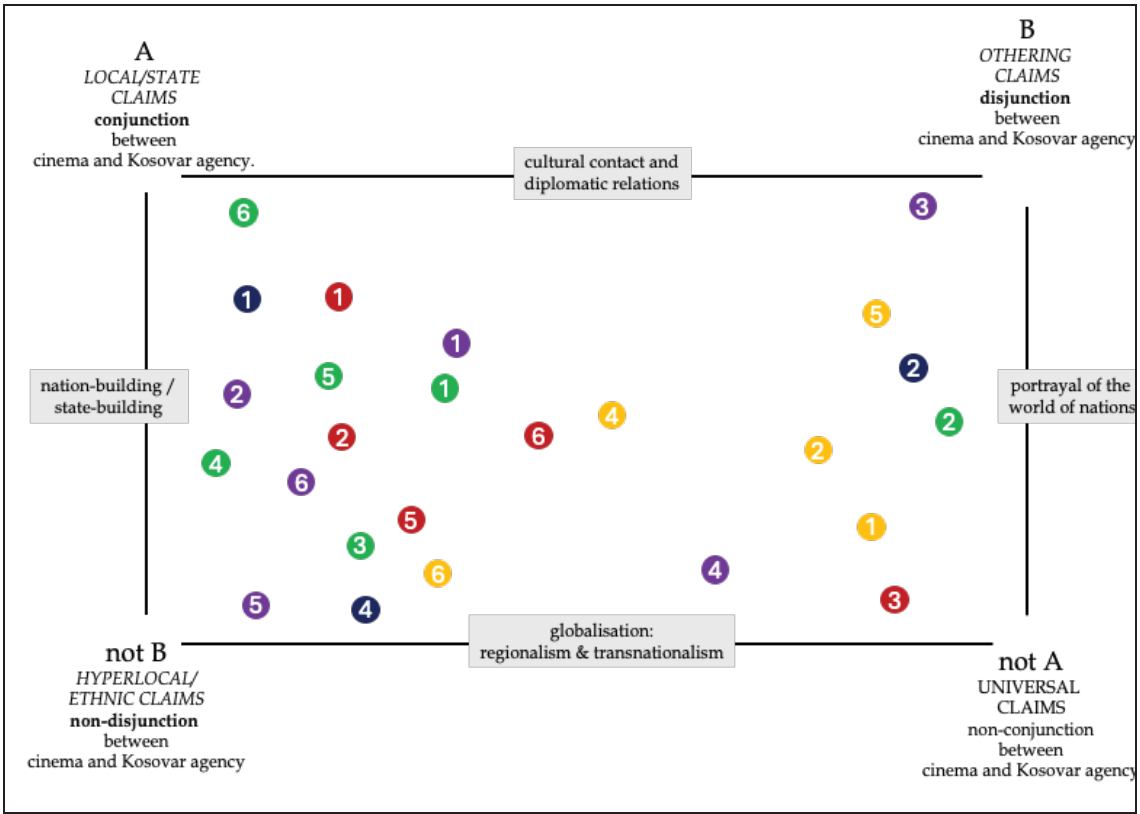

Fig. 2 - Semiotic square after locating and mapping each category in each film

Categories: **Green: Women empowerment** / **Blue: Conflict & Relations with Serbia** / **Red: Emigration** / **Yellow: Tradition & Religion** / **Violet: Placemaking**

Films: (1) The Marriage / (2) The Flying Circus / (3) Exile / (4) Hive / (5) The Hill Where Lionesses Roar / (6) Vera Dreams of the Seas.

2. The Construction of the Self through Cinema

Kosovar cinema serves as a narrative language to build and communicate identities—but uniquely, it does so not through myth or folklore, but through present-day dilemmas and individual characters. These characters do not explicitly present themselves as "Kosovar" or "Kosovo Albanian," but as singular agents shaped by specific circumstances. Their Self representation emerges through context and narrative. A notable pattern here is the figure of the *transitive underdog*. Victimhood is not ethnic or absolute, but relational and situational. Characters are typically in disadvantaged positions, but power is fluid, and agency is constantly negotiated. The representation of the *Self* in these films conveys a unique form of strength—not the conventional image of a physically powerful man who overcomes all obstacles, but a strength rooted in the acceptance of limitations, including

physical, social, and emotional barriers. This is a strength expressed through resilience, sadness, and perseverance—a form of quiet defiance rather than dominance. It is the strength of a girl who is powerless financially and marginalized geographically; of a man whose strength lies in spontaneity and the transformative power of acting; of a woman who, after losing her husband, resists patriarchy with determination and dignity. These nuanced portrayals redefine what it means to be strong.

Kosovar films project a tone—a sober realism defined by emotional restraint, hardship, and dignified perseverance. They avoid celebratory nationalism. Rather than facing a visible adversary (like Serbia), protagonists confront adversity embedded in social structures or internal struggles. Sometimes institutions support them (*Vera Dreams of the Sea*), but often they become obstacles (*Hive*, *The Flying Circus*). These representations are ethical and aesthetic, not ethnic. Through these movies, the language is about resilience, absurdity, misunderstanding, and isolation. Interestingly, this marginal position mirrors the condition of Kosovar cinema itself: peripheral, little known, but symbolically potent. Kosovar filmmakers are conscious of Balkan stereotypes and use creative approaches to frame war as background, not narrative core. War coexists with themes like migration, patriarchy, precarious labor, and harassment. Also worth noting, women filmmakers dominate the industry, mirroring the prominence of women empowerment in the films themselves.

Also, cinema from Kosovo is transformative in real time. It actively repositions social and political debates, as seen with *The Marriage* (2017). It is a strong example of culture engaging in democratic dialogue. Unlike other European ecosystems, Kosovo does not promote its territory for tourism through cinema though this is a task that it has slowly been done in the last years. As of its stories, they center on human landscapes. The country's soft power challenge lies in aligning heroic characters with supportive institutions —a task still pending through storytelling. Most films lack a foundational state narrative; they focus instead on bottom-up stories of resilience. There is a clear distance from institutional, multiethnic narratives. The Albanian perspective dominates, understandably. However, the films propose a distinct form of Albanian identity—rooted in local dialect, not standardized language.

All the filmmakers interviewed agree that Kosovar cinema is experiencing a promising moment, especially considering the limited resources available. Gradually, Kosovo is gaining visibility in international festivals and competitions, enhancing its soft power and contributing to a renewed narrative framework for the country's image abroad. This progress offers a horizon of optimism for the continued development of Kosovar cinema and opens the door for major industry stakeholders to recognize Kosovo as a valuable ecosystem for storytelling—both for its wealth of compelling narratives and the technical quality of its film professionals. Institutions such as the Kosovo Cinematography Center serve as key catalysts in this process, and it is essential that they continue to play a central role in such a highly competitive global landscape.

The representation of Kosovo through cinema as a soft power mechanism is framed as a continuous, dignified struggle against adversity.

This framing resonates on two levels:

- **Soft power narrative:** *"What makes us valuable is a character that transcends the challenges the world imposes on us."*
- **Identity narrative:** *"What makes us unique is a character that rises above our internal differences."*

IV- RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerge from a study focused primarily on the narrative dimension of Kosovar cinema and its potential as a tool for soft power. It is important to note that this work does not engage in a structural or in-depth analysis of the industrial aspects of the film sector in Kosovo—such as funding mechanisms, distribution models, or historical evolution.

Therefore, the recommendations presented here should be seen as preliminary inputs for further dialogue rather than conclusive actionable suggestions. The core of our inquiry has centered on the kinds of stories Kosovo is telling through film, and how these narratives can be positioned strategically to reflect and amplify a Kosovar agency that resonates both domestically and internationally. In this sense, the recommendations are exploratory paths for projecting Kosovar subjectivity within the global storytelling codes currently shaping cultural visibility. At the heart of our suggestions lies a guiding idea: **the coherence and the parallels between Kosovo's film industry—small, peripheral, yet passionate and resilient—and the moral strength and integrity of its on-screen protagonists navigating adversity**. This narrative mirroring may serve as the most compelling frame for Kosovo's cinematic voice on the world stage.

1. To Academia & Research Institutions

1. Encourage academic-practical collaboration with the Kosovo Cinematography Center (KCC) to explore cinema as an instrument of soft power.
2. Promote monitoring and policy research on the international circulation and symbolic reception of Kosovar cinema.

2. To Cultural Institutions & Diplomacy

3. Use cinema as a tool of cultural diplomacy in expos, fairs, embassies, and bilateral programs.
4. Keep supporting and coordinating actions between the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the KCC to project Kosovo's image abroad through film.
5. Create a professional catalogue of Kosovar cinema for curated promotion (i.e., Takflix, in Ukraine).
6. Launch a residency program pairing international digital influencers with emerging local filmmakers to co-create short films highlighting Kosovo's landscapes and culture.

3. For Funding Platforms and International Foundations

7. Prioritize funding for stories that bridge the personal and the political.
8. Encourage co-productions that strengthen regional cultural collaboration without exoticizing Kosovo.
9. Support the development of regional story labs focused on themes of identity, transition, and recognition.
10. Create specific grants for projects that use cinema to explore issues of statehood and civic belonging.

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