About the Film Lapidari
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The sounds of war and partisan songs accompany the first shots of the film Lapidari: Perched on a hill top, the cameraman shows the entire green valley, partially filled with the smoke clouds of the battles. So we are somewhere in the years ’43–’44 of the previous century, when all of humanity and Albania were involved in the horrible events of the Second World War. On the one side the partisans, and on the other the Nazi occupiers, in a bloody battle for freedom or death on the land of the Albanian people, completely exhausted by the centuries of occupations and occupiers.

The film carries the signature of the most important directors and members of the cinema of the dictatorial regime. Its length of 10 minutes classifies it as a short film, but as we will see below, in those few minutes the director synthesizes shy of half a century of Albanian socialist history.

In the above war, there is a village cradled in the valley, and next to it a small plateau where a partisan loses his life. A solemn moment, his friends from the partisan brigade build his final abode. His grave rests on and is surrounded by several rounded river stones, while on top there is a large rock on which one of the partisans inscribes the martyr’s name. A red scarf – symbol of the partisan resistance – covers his underground chest as his fellow warriors give him the honors of the moment by placing springtime flowers, whose aroma can unfortunately no longer be smelled (fig. 1). In a tracking shot, the camera makes an inventory of the flowers along the grave–monument, continuing to the next shot. A shepherd chiseling a double-headed eagle onto a plaque to add it to the mass of furnishings belonging to the martyr. Two women, one dressed in black, most certainly the partisan’s mother, an another, younger one, his wife, with a red overskirt, approach the grave to place some other flowers. The mother caresses her son’s head, while his wife touches his feet, then touching her pregnant belly, as if to suggest the force of life over death.

The next scene opens with the agrarian reform of 1946, when the farm grounds were confiscated from the land owners of the old regime and distributed among simple villagers. Meanwhile the martyr’s child has been born and has grown enough to accompany his mother to work the soil. Happy villagers sow around the grave–monument.

From far we hear the sound of railroad construction. We are in a new stage of social development, the train, the locomotive, the industrialization of the economy. In the meanwhile the monument seeks to update itself according to these new criteria. From the form composed of river stones, ordered and sculpted by artisans, the monument takes on the form of a small pyramid (fig. 2, 3).

Not much time passes before the film touches upon another chapter of history, the completion of the modernization objectives of socialism. Albania is shown as...
a country of well-being, mechanized means of production, population growth, electrification, a railway and road network, etc. Owing to this further progress, the monument will reformulate itself anew as something resembling the form of an obelisk built from marble plaques (fig. 4). People from around the country assemble near it to honor and pay respect to the figure of the martyr. His son has grown up and has become a man. Reminiscences of the past pass before his eyes as he plows the field near the lapidar, not by means of a plow and oxen but with a tractor.

Final fragments of the film: the village celebrates the marriage of the martyr’s son in the abundance of socialist realism. The monument on top of the hill has transformed into a place of pilgrimage for the young generations and children accompanied by the kindergarten teacher.

The film Lapidari was practically unknown to the Albanian public of the time and even more so in our days. Nonetheless, this art work possesses some very special elements in terms of sociology, philosophy, and politics. In Albania there exists a large variety of lapidars built throughout the entire territory, near cities, villages, motorways, but also far away in remote hilly and mountainous areas. The present publication of photographs, created by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and Marco Mazzi, is proof of that.

If we ask about the reasons of their construction during the dictatorial regime, we will be able to list the most important ones. First, lapidars have a simple function; to commemorate the battles against the occupiers, partisan martyrs, but also those massacred in revenge by the occupiers. In this sense, the lapidar aims to be a monumental work related to a place and a concrete event of the past. As a work that is both artistic and especially monumental, the lapidar becomes a sign and carrier of the heroic history of the country. But not only that. A monumental work related to historical events is a point of unchangeability sculpted in time. Through the importance of the event, it seeks immortality as a monumental work on the condition that nothing threatens or touches – if not the content of the event, then at least its monumental form.

Second, as a consequence, the lapidar or monument acquires another function as a storage of collective memory or the people of past events, whom one tries to relate to the living that assemble around them in their remembrance and honor. This is not something extraordinary, but a phenomenon that we encounter any time that we visit the graves of regular mortals. Only the lapidar posits something deeper, the struggle and death of several people whose identities and characteristics are extinguished relatively to the main symbol that embodies their labor. The same happens with martyrs’ cemeteries or monuments of the unknown soldier. War monuments have a heavier concrete and symbolic weight than regular graves. That is one of the reasons to bury the body of the former dictator near the martyrs’ cemetery in Tiranë in 1985, and the same holds in our times for people fallen on duty, mainly police officers.

Third, thanks to this contact with the memory of the fallen, the lapidar fulfills a necessary ethical function in the moralization, disciplining, and education of society. Except informing, commemoration, and respect, this rapport touches upon people’s affects toward martyrs, a cathartic process that on the one side pacifies the spirits as happens in cemeteries, while on the other side mobilizing individuals who not only guard the memory, event, history, but who also behave in such a way that their actions are considered worthy toward the blood spilled for freedom. Honoring monuments implies humility, respect, and engagement with the continuation

Fig. 3 Lapidari (screenshot).

Fig. 4 Lapidari (screenshot).
of the heroic act of the martyrs.

Fourth, the lapidars are built with another aim, this time metaphysical. As cultic and sacred places, they cause a spiritual feeling throughout the body. If we focus on the commemorative rituals surrounding monuments, the entire behavior resembles a religious ceremony. There we find a sacred place, a cause, martyrs, and later a monumental constructions in their honor, as compensation for the absent body. In the ideology of the time, metaphysical approaches were strictly prohibited, above all after the legal ban on religious institutions and practices as well as the constitutional sanction that God did not exist. But like any ideological machinery, it needs new motives, one of which is the ritualization and sacralization of places of those who fell during the war. In fact, this phenomenon is completely metaphysical albeit patched and camouflaged with concrete elements: a simplified esthetic in the construction of lapidars in order not to give them artistic properties detached from major events; uniformization of the majority of lapidars according to the same architectural and artistic stylistics. A regime may halt the functioning of several institutions but not of concepts and mentalities. The metaphysical language serves to form a dichotomy of the event between the concrete act and its politicization.

And so we arrive at the fifth reason. A regime conceived to live for a long time, even planned as infallible, well-constructed once and for all on its principles and ideology, stubborn, which after several decades takes on the form of immortality and the cult of a charismatic leader, needs to dig in the past of its country to find different ways to legitimize its existence as a consequence of the historical stages of the country, and naturally as the final prophet of the realization of the infant nation itself. To fulfill its own prophecy, the regime needs a new archeology not only of knowledge but of its interpretation and construction, there where things do not go according to the vision of the regime, by means of monuments. A part of the partisans have fallen in battle. Their bodies no longer exist. The scientific–stalinist ideology of the regime confirms that after death there is nothing else. But here metaphysics intervenes and expresses itself with romantic and sentimentalist overtones about the martyrs that live in our hearts and minds. But this virtual life full of affects alone is not enough. That’s why who knows how many lapidars need to be built to give life to the absent bodies, to materialize and congeal in a pile of inert matter called a lapidar. The annual pilgrimage to the martyrs’ places is a politicization and continuous manipulation of the living by means of the dead who occupy the figures of apostles and ecumenical disciples. The construction of monuments substitutes for the churches and mosques destroyed after 1967. This phenomenon is not articulated as a simple substitution of one form of sacredness with another. In the eyes of the regime, religious metaphysics is related to superstitious forms, whereas lapidars and monuments signify something true; the loss of life for freedom. The politicization of the martyr’s body through religio-ideological ritualization and ceremony has been so strong, that in our days a part of society still treats the lapidar as symbol of the dictatorial communist regime, that is, as a farce, as an image without body.

In the film several events are intertwined in a complex and parallel manner. The main event in the first shot is of course related to the death of a partisan and the construction of his lapidar. Other events are fluid and transitory. Between the first shot and the fragmentary images, the process of construction the country happens, which in truth is the fundamental aspect of the film. Our film resembles a polyphony composed of three voices, two allegedly occupying the spotlight, and the third one articulated according to the moment and need. But which is the more interesting aspect of the film?

When we listed some of the functional aspects of lapidars above, we stressed that their role as commemorative monuments and signifiers of past events, and, as a consequence, the monument as work and as event, does not need to change in form. The approaches, sensitivities, or interpretations of society may change over time. But a monument, whether this or that lapidar, art work, historical building, etc., never. Thanks to them, people have the possibility to touch the past, to understand the conditions that brought something to life, to penetrate into norms and concepts of a society that is no longer alive. This, among others, is the reason why people admire a Roman aqueduct, a Byzantine church, a Mona Lisa, an amphitheater from antiquity, etc. Their untouchability often has a universal value allowing us to understand and experience the pains and sufferings of mankind at a distance. Monumental objects relating to a bitter or pleasant event derive their value precisely from the embodiment of the invulnerability of existence in form and mentality, even though the current stage of civilization, in crisis situations and overturning, has preferred to hide the victims together with the necessary traces to build a commemorative object – the case of mass annihilation (Shoah) is a witness to the criminal schizophrenia that claimed not only the disappearance of a people but especially the disappearance of the process of disappearance.

In the film, by contrast, we notice that the martyr’s monument finds itself in a wave of constant metamorphosis. It is increasingly modified in tandem with the
progressive development of the country. First a grave surrounded by stones. Then a lapidar of about three meters high. And finally, an obelisk consisting of marble plaques of about ten meters. Maybe the director wanted to give a message about the martyr’s life, where the lapidar, as vital extension of his body, grows according to the progress of Albanian modernity – a message that is extremely explicit in the film. The entire life of the village is organized around the monumental body as if the latter lies waiting to see whether or not the work of society coincides with the ideals of the war and the loss of life. A dialectic relation. Society seems to give account for everything it does in daily life. So the idea is understandable that memory unfolds in terms of social frameworks and that beyond them individuals cannot relate between generations, as the dead live together with the living in terms of collective memory and that the problems of the dead weigh continuously upon the living. The martyr–monument serves as a pivot around which not only society exists but remembers its past. On another level of the film, the entire development of the country is presented fragmentarily, which on the one hand seeks to be the authoritative voice of innovations, while on the other to show the living and the dead the continuous struggle for the preservation of the martyrs’ monumental work. We see here summarized the entire evolution of society from the conditions of an enslaved and occupied people into a society that enters the modern world of industrialization without forgetting the effort of their martyr fathers.

The great need to give monuments the metaphysical attributes of a living being maybe falsifies unintentionally the notion itself of the unchangeable monument as work related to an event and a place. In truth, we do not stand in front of a technical lapsus of the film, but rather an artistic artifice that shows something else: the politicization of history, life, man, aims, and usage of emotions to serve governmental power. There where governmental power is unable to threaten a historical object, this object is given another interpretation according to the vision of the regime with the help of historiography and ideology.

But in our case this metastable situation of the monument as never-ending process serves governmental power in an instrumentalization that we also encounter in other societies, and which is supported by the figure of the martyr and his capture in the strategic mechanism of governmental power. The growing intensity of the events of the past, thanks to the euphoric–victimizing metaphor, serves the broadening of governmental power over a multitude of events that no longer belong to the past but to the present and the future. In a completely banal way, there exist current trends to dedicate further attention to the National Liberation War for political reasons, consisting in the growth of the party electorate and militance, simply exploiting affects and emotions related to the figure of the martyr. But the totalitarian regime acted according to the same technique. The emphasis on the role of the partisans and martyrs in daily life, in slogans, books, educational and disciplinary methodology, in cinema and literature, did not have to do directly with the deceased, but with the impact that they have on the living, who need to be governed and manipulated through all kinds of means and manners.

In conclusion, we would emphasize that totalitarian governmental powers are distinguished by yet another feature, by the aim and practice that they have in maintaining their hegemony over the entirety of life in all its variety. Fixated on the ideals of progress and advancement, of war for the domination of territories and ever greater populations, the victim’s body has to live continually as an embalmed body within a half amorphous monument. So a part of the state crimes are realized not only in the name of the living people but also of the living martyrs, which maybe would be extraordinarily ashamed if they would have been able to foresee what would happen after the liberation. The political control over the dead is a control over memory and thus the continuous control over the living is realized. It is this fundamental reason why the lapidar in Lapidari is constantly in a state of construction, because governmental power never ends in a stadium or stage, and even should not be thought as a monolithic structure but as a dynamics that needs new energy to maintain its self-existence.