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Obsah | Contents

Editorial 5

1. Studie a eseje | Studies and Essays

STANISLAV HOLUBEC – Introduction: Imagining the Future as a Culture of Defeat – Eastern and Central European Imagined Futures since 1945
Úvod: Představy o budoucnosti jako kultura porážky – východoevropské a středoevropské představy o budoucnosti od roku 1945 9

ANNA ELISABETH KEIM – World Unity as the Only Future for Modernity: Localising the World State Idea and Its Proponents in (late) 1940s Germany
Světová jednota jako jediná budoucnost modernity: nalézání myšlenky světového státu a jejich zastánců v Německu (konce) 40. let 20. století 17

LEJLA VESKOVIĆ – Two Futures Imagined in the Post-socialist Yugoslav Sphere
Dvě představy budoucnosti v postsocialistické jugosféře 45

ANASTASIA MITROFANOVA – The Future Seen from the Edge of Society: Contemporary Russophone Communist Sci-Fi
Budoucnost nablížená z okraje společnosti: současná ruskojazyčná komunistická sci-fi 75

ENIS SULSTAROVA – The Future of a Stalinist State: Albanian Science Fiction Literature during Communism
Budoucnost stalinistického státu: albánská vědeckofantastická literatura za komunismu 91

2. Diskuse a rozepře | Discussions and Disputes

PETR WOHLMUTH – “You have to do it with love... Oral history was something I was never paid for...” An Interview with Professor Alessandro Portelli (Sapienza Università di Roma)
„Musíte to dělat s láskou... za práci v oboru orální historie jsem nikdy neobdržel žádnou mzdu...” Rozhovor s profesorem Alessandrem Portellim 115

3. Recenze a reflexe | Reviews and Reflections

JIŘÍ ŠTAIF – <i>Modernizace na pokračování. Společnost v českých zemích (1770–1918)</i> (Pavel Himl)	133
MARTIN NODL – <i>Na vlnách dějin. Minulost – přítomnost – budoucnost českého dějepisectví</i> (Jan Horský)	140
DANIELA MYSLIWIEZ-FLEISS – <i>Die Fabrik als touristische Attraktion. Entdeckung eines neuen Erlebnisraums im Übergang zur Moderne</i> (Zdeněk Nebřenský)	155
E. MICHAEL GERLI, RYAN D. GILES (EDD.) – <i>The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion to Medieval Iberia: Unity in Diversity</i> (David de Pablo)	161
Editorial Note	167
Upozornění redakce	170

THE FUTURE OF A STALINIST STATE: ALBANIAN SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE DURING COMMUNISM

Enis Sulstarova

The article aims to show how the Albania of the future was imaged through the science fiction literature published in the country in the 1970s and 1980s, which was the “golden age” of this genre in Albania. Science fiction was considered to be a part of children’s and young adult literature that supplemented science education. Although the writers could envision what their country would look like in the next decades or centuries, they had to ground their imagination in sound scientific data, and they had to keep in mind the political realities of the present. Albanian science fiction literature reflected the fact that Stalinist Albania was one of the most isolated countries on the planet. Albania projected into the future was expected to be a highly developed country, whose spaceships, guided by pioneers, explored the universe, but at the same time it was vigilantly protecting its borders against capitalist and socialist revisionist states. Unlike what happened in other socialist countries in the post-Stalinist period, science fiction in Albania could not function as a subtle critique of reality and the Cold War. On the contrary, it served to limit the political horizon within which the children would grow up: while the imagined Albania of the future allegedly offered them limitless possibilities in technical and scientific achievements, they had to live in the same “frozen” socio-political system as in the present.

Keywords: science fiction, literature, Albania, socialism, future

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Science Fiction and Its “Golden Age” in Albania

This article aims to present the imagining of the socialist Albania of the future, as it was described in the science fiction literature published for children and adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s. While the genre of science fiction is generally valued for its capacity to imagine alternative societies and possibilities in the future that are grounded in scientific and technological development, we precisely question this effect in the case of Albanian science fiction literature. We argue that this genre engrained in the readers the identity of the “new man” and had disciplinary effects on their imagination concerning the socio-economic order where they lived. Science fiction works indeed stimulated children to imagine the possibilities that science and technology would provide to them in the future, but at the same time, they provided a panorama of Stalinist Albania predicted in the coming decades or centuries. To present this paradox of a technologically superior country of the future simultaneously “frozen” in the political system of the present, we analyze the description of Albanian society in the books that were published with the label “science fiction.” From a preliminary reading of twenty-four novels and story collections labelled “science fiction” on their covers, we have selected a sample of fourteen books (nine novels and five story collections), whose narratives offer to the reader long passages or glimpses into how an Albania of the future would have developed from the foundations laid in the socialist present. This panorama of imagined Albania will be constructed in the second section of this paper. Before that, in the present section, we will look at the characteristics of science fiction and the development of this genre of literature in Albania.

While the imaginings of the future have always been part of cultures, we could say that modernity is oriented towards the future. If in pre-modern societies the fantastic and mythical were part of everyday life, in modern societies, which are supposedly guided by rationality and science, the fantastic could be realized in the future, as the result of unstoppable scientific progress. Modern society tends to plan and control the future, a phenomenon for which the sociologist Anthony Giddens has coined the phrase “colonization of the future.”¹ The genre of science fiction was arguably established in Europe in the second half of the 19th century, by works of literature that made use of real or imagined scientific discoveries and technological inventions, in order to produce a sense of wonder in the readers, or what David Nye, a historian of technology, has called the “technological sub-

1 ANTHONY GIDDENS, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge 1991.

lime.”² Its most known representatives were Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. The seemingly unstoppable scientific discoveries and technological innovations in the Western part of the world at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century created the widespread impression that science was gaining the upper hand over religion and many expected that it could resolve the contradictions and tensions of the industrial society itself. But the genre reflected not only the optimistic expectations about the scientific revolution but also the anxieties and nightmares generated by the domination of machines and one-sided rationality on the horizon of modern societies. Especially in the 20th century, writers of science fiction imagined dystopia, where technology went hand in hand with totalitarian regimes. George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *New Brave World* employed elements of science fiction to warn humanity about the possibility of a bleak future whose tendencies they observed in the present.

In general, science fiction is understood to include artistic productions, especially literature and films, that deal with the impact of actual science or imagined scientific discoveries and technological innovations upon individuals and human societies. Beyond such generalizations, it is notoriously difficult to pin down science fiction and offer a definition of the genre that would cover all its various manifestations. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, one of the editors writes that “science fiction is less a genre – a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion.”³ The author of an introductory text to science fiction calls it a “perplexing genre.” She declines to give a “totalized answer” to the question of what is science fiction, opting instead to offer to the readers of her book multiple fragmented explanations, standing in tension with one another and producing multiple images of what is generally labelled as science fiction.⁴ Many scholars include in their theoretical considerations the influential and succinct definition by Darko Suvin: “Science fiction is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and the interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”⁵ The estrangement, or the alienation, stems from the newness of the environment in which the plot is situ-

2 FARAH MENDLESOHN, *Introduction: Reading Science Fiction*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, (eds.) Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge 2003, p. 3.

3 FARAH MENDLESOHN, *Introduction*, p. 1.

4 SHERRYL VINT, *Science Fiction: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London 2014, p. 6.

5 DARKO SUVIN, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven 1979, pp. 7–8.

ated, which is due to imaginary technological innovations, the discovery of new worlds, travels ahead in time etc., all of that unfamiliar to the empirical world of the authors and of the readers. However, the estrangement is balanced by the cognitive aspect of works of science fiction that differentiate them from fantasy, myth, and folktales. Travelling faster than the speed of light in a spaceship and travelling on a flying carpet are both estranging literary representations, but while the flying carpet, as part of the magical and fantastic realm, stands totally outside the empirical world, the spaceship, which transcends the speed of light, can still be rationally conceived as a technological newness – or a “novum”, in Darko Suvin’s terminology – that is the result of the application of known scientific laws, or validated by logical principles.⁶ Cognition and estrangement are put in a dialectical relationship in science fiction, to stimulate critical reflection about the empirical world of the readers and make them imagine alternative and better possibilities for humanity. As he put it in a recent article, “We need radically liberating novums only... I mean a novelty that is in critical opposition to degrading relationships between people as well as to the commodification of human and surrounding nature.”⁷

By emphasizing the dialectical interaction of the empirical world with what sounds strange but at the same time plausible, science fiction opens critical interrogation of what shapes the normality of readers’ societies and cultures. Suvin integrates science fiction with the tradition of utopian writing, but this comes at a price because he dismisses as “perishable” most pulp literature published under the label of science fiction.⁸ For him, the maturity of the genre is reached when it does not aim solely at the popularization/didactics of science but aims at a socially transformative ethos that goes beyond the topic of an adventurous and extraordinary voyage, which are characteristic of the novels of Jules Verne, for instance.⁹ Carl Freedman refines Suvin’s definition by arguing that the characteristic of science fiction is not cognition itself but the cognition effect of the texts,¹⁰ which implies that the genre should be judged by the rationality and coherence within the text itself, not by epistemological criteria outside the text. The non-existence of alien Martians does not disqualify from the science fiction genre those popular works that described an imagined Martian invasion of Earth.

6 D. SUVIN, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 63.

7 DARKO SUVIN, *On Communism, Science Fiction, and Utopia: The Blagoevgrad Theses*, *Mediations* 32/2019, no. 2, p. 146.

8 S. VINT, *Science Fiction*, pp. 38–39.

9 D. SUVIN, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, pp. 22–23.

10 CARL FREEDMAN, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, Middletown 2000, pp. 18–19.

In the same vein, contemporary scholars are critical of Suvin's exclusive focus on a handful of authors as representative of the genre and tend to be inclusive towards texts that are organized around themes and trappings such as starships, interstellar travel, time machines, robots, alien creatures from other planets, etc. Although in many science fiction novels and films, the function of the "nova" is just to entertain through the spectacular and the fantastic, some notable works explore alterity and offer fresh perspectives on issues like gender, race, class, environment, war, and peace, etc.¹¹

The dialectics between cognition effect and estrangement is a convenient approach for politically informed studies of science fiction. The works of the genre whose subject is situated in the future can be critically read to figure out whether they criticize the present (conventionally understood as the time when they are written and published) or enhance the hegemony of the dominant ideology that legitimizes the present socio-political order. Science fiction works can contain utopian visions and impulses that question the normalcy of the present, but they also can take part in the making of so-called normal subjects. Utopias contained in earlier generations of science fiction about industrial civilization look naïve or out of place when they are confronted with environmental pollution and urban decay at the turn of the 20th century. Fredric Jameson, a theorist of culture, said: "These visions are themselves now historical and dated – streamlined cities of the future on peeling murals – while our lived experience of our greatest metropolises is one of urban decay and blight. That particular utopian future has in other words turned out to have been merely the future of one moment of what is now our own past."¹²

As the literary genre of science fiction developed in Albania under the communist regime, it bore the ideological imprint of Marxism–Leninism, the ruling ideology formalized by Stalin in the Soviet Union and copied by communist regimes in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Marxism–Leninism was considered to offer a scientific route to communist society, which represented the various utopian visions in the socialist tradition of thought. Science fiction was an important venue in the 19th century and early 20th century to propagate socialist ideas.¹³ For instance, in 1908 Alexander Bogdanov, a Russian Bolshevik,

11 ADAM ROBERTS, *Science Fiction*, London 2006, pp. 11–12, 17.

12 FREDRIC JAMESON, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London 2005, p. 286.

13 ISTVAN CSICSERY-RONARY, *Marxist Theory and Science Fiction*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, (eds.) Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge 2003, pp. 113–114.

published the novel *Red Star*, in which he described a humanoid higher civilization on Mars that was run according to communist collectivist principles. After the establishment of the Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy in the Soviet Union, though, science fiction writers had to concentrate on the heroism of the New Man and not engage in utopian writing that might be taken as a critique of the present socialist society and regime. Even the novel *Red Star* was not reissued from 1928–1979, most likely because its Martian communist society is a planetary one, and because a Martian scientist predicts, rather accurately, what would be the fate of an isolated socialist state on Earth: “It is difficult to foresee the outcome of these conflicts, but even in those instances where socialism prevails and triumphs, its character will be perverted deeply and for a long time to come by years of encirclement, unavoidable terror and militarism, and the barbarian patriotism that is their inevitable consequence. This socialism will be a far cry from our own.”¹⁴

After the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, they tried to mold the popular literature of adventure and scientific inventions with their transformative and future-oriented vision of a new society. Out of the literary and cultural debates of the 1920s emerged the genre of “scientific-fantastic literature” (*nauchnaia fantastika literatura*), whose main representatives were Aleksei Tolstoi and Alexandr Beliaev. These authors tried to counter the Western pulp fiction of science inventions, marvels, and adventures with stories and novels that heralded the revolution of the working masses against loathful dictators and capitalists, who used technological devices to control and exploit them. With the tightening of state control over cultural production in the Stalinist years, attempts were made to replace science fiction with another genre, called “scientific-fictional literature” (*nauchno-khudozhestvennaiva literatura*), which was designed to better integrate literature with “real” industrial and scientific advancements in the country. Science-fictional literature would be purged of fantastic speculations about distant futures, and it would become a means for science popularization among children and adults. Under the rules laid down by the style of socialist realism, the plots had to be situated in the present or near future and the state ideology was more overt than in the science fiction of the 1920s.¹⁵ Only after the death of Stalin in 1953 did science fiction in the Soviet Union experience a revival, represented by Ivan Yefremov’s *Andromeda*, published in 1959, and by

14 ALEXANDER BOGDANOV, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia*, Bloomington 1984, p. 114.

15 See MATTHIAS SCHWARTZ, *How Nauchnaia Fantastika Was Made: The Debates about the Genre of Science Fiction from NEP to High Stalinism*, *Slavic Review* 72/2013, no. 2, pp. 224–246.

the works of brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky in the 1960s. This revival was triggered by the brief superiority that the Soviet Union space project enjoyed from the launch of Sputnik in 1957 until U.S. astronauts landed on the Moon in 1969. It reflected the confidence and creativity of a generation of engineers, scientists, and other professionals who hoped for a better future. Nevertheless, narratives on human life on other planets and possible encounters with alien civilizations carried with them routes of escape from the limitations the communist regime imposed on society and intellectuals in particular. Even after the revival of the genre, there were limits about what could be published under the rubric of science fiction, therefore many science fiction works in the 1970s and 1980s circulated in samizdat.¹⁶

In Albanian literature, there was no science fiction before the communist period. The “golden age” of this genre was during the 1970s and 1980s, when most books bearing the labels “science fiction stories” and “science fiction novel”¹⁷ were published, as a subset of children’s literature. From the start, the boundaries of what was considered science fiction were unclear, because the label was printed on the cover of books whose subjects were imaginary technological innovations, extrapolations in the future, stories about science and famous scientists, knowledge about the solar system and space travel, as well as personifications of human body organs and the body’s immune system.¹⁸ The overriding motive in publishing “science fiction” was to stimulate both the imagination and the interest for science and technology in children. The cognitive aspect of this kind of literature was the expansion of the information about physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and mathematics that was taught in schools. The emphasis on didactics, but also the classification inherited from the communist period, explain the reason

- 16 I. CSICSEY-RONARY, *Marxist Theory and Science Fiction*, pp. 114–115; LARISA MIKHAYLOVA, *Shetidesyatniki: The Conjunction of Inner and Outer Space in Eastern European Science Fiction*, in: *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, (eds.) Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link, Cambridge 2019, pp. 381–382; MATTHIAS SCHWARTZ, *A Dream Come True: Close Encounters with Outer Space in Soviet Popular Scientific Journals of the 1950s and 1960s*, in *Soviet Space Culture: Cosmic Enthusiasms in Socialist Societies*, (eds.) Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Ruthers and Carmen Scheide, Basingstoke 2011, p. 241–245.
- 17 These labels in Albanian are, respectively, “tregime fantastiko-shkencore” and “roman fantastiko-shkencor”, which *in verbatim* mean fantastic-scientific stories and novels, thus close to the Soviet label “scientific-fantastic literature”.
- 18 I.e. NIKO DEDA, ‘Gjyqi’ i Arkimedit, Tirana 1973; KUDRET HOXHHA, *Lajmëtarë i planetëve*, Tirana 1973; ALQI KRISTO, *Një jetë në anije: Udhëtim fantastiko-shkencor*, Tirana 1972; THANAS QERAMA, *Roboti i pabindur*, Tirana, 1981; THANAS QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*, Tirana 1982; FLAMUR TOPI, *Lufta për jetën*, Tirana 1978.

why in the most comprehensive up-to-date history of the Albanian literature for children, science fiction works are overviewed together with anthropomorphic works,¹⁹ under the rubric of scientific-fictional literature.²⁰

Soviet science fiction was introduced to Albania in the 1950s and 1960s: Aleksei Tolstói's *Aelita* was published in 1956, while his other novel *The Garin Death Ray*, together with Alexandr Beliaev's *The Amphibian Man* and *The Air Seller*, and Ivan Yefremov's *Andromeda Nebula*, were all published in the 1960s.²¹ From the Western authors, only books by Jules Verne were published in the 1950s, while stories from contemporary authors, such as Isaac Asimov and Kurt Vonnegut, appeared only in the second half of the 1980s, a time when the communist regime was showing sign of liberalization in the cultural sphere.²² Science fiction stories for children written by Albanian authors started to appear in children's magazines in the 1960s. From the 1970s to the end of the communist period in 1990, the genre was consolidated, with over twenty books bearing the label "science fiction," but it waned afterwards. The authors of science fiction were male journalists and editors of children's popular magazines and teachers of physics, mathematics, medicine, and natural sciences. Usually, they wrote science fiction alongside other genres, such as fairy tales and divulgation pieces of history and sciences. The most known writer of science fiction was Thanas Qerama (1945–2004), a journalist, who from 1979–1989 served as editor-in-chief of *Horizonti* scientific magazine for children, in which science fiction stories were published. Other writers of science fiction for children were Niko Deda, Bedri Dedja, As-trit Bishqemi, Alqi Kristo, and Flamur Topi. Only two novels were aimed at adult readers: *Shëtitje në kozmos* (*Wandering in Cosmos*) by Alqi Kristo describes the undreamt-of adventures of a young man in other worlds, in the company of a humanoid alien; *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* (*Towards Epsilon Eridani*) by physicist Arion Hysenbegas is about a team of cosmonauts sent to make contact with an alien civilization.²³ The common venues where science fiction stories

19 Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to animals, objects or imaginary entities.

20 ASTRIT BISHQEMI, *Histori e letërsisë shqiptare për fëmijë e të rinj*, Elbasan 2008, pp. 728–736.

21 ALEXANDER BELIAEV, *Njeriu amfib*, Tirana, 1962; ALEXANDER BELIAEV, *Shtësi i ajrit*, Tirana, 1966; ALEKSEI TOLSTOI, *Aelita*, Tirana 1956; ALEKSEI TOLSTOI, *Hiperboloidi i inxhinier Garinit*, Tirana 1965; IVAN YEFREMOV, *Mjegullnaja e Andromedës*, Tirana 1961.

22 In 1987 appeared *Efekt i Barnhaus* (The Barhouse Effect), an anthology of science fiction stories by foreign authors.

23 ALQI KRISTO, *Shëtitje në kozmos*, Tirana 1978; ARION HYSENBEGAS, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, Tirana 1983.

appeared were the popular scientific magazines for adults and children, *Shkenca dhe jeta* (*Science and Life*), *Horizonti* (*Horizon*) and *Pionieri* (*Pioneer*). Novels and story collections of the genre were published by Naim Frashëri, the state publishing house, named after Albania's national poet, which printed all genres of artistic literature. Some of the science fiction was adapted into radio programs for children. Flamur Topi's *Lufta për jetën*, which was assigned the label "science fiction" but in reality was an anthropomorphic novel about the war between the body's immune system and the armies of germs, was turned into an animated short movie for children.²⁴

Compared with the "golden age," fewer science fiction books by Albanian authors were published after the fall of communism. Some post-communist publications were new editions of previously published works,²⁵ while new works²⁶ continued the tradition of science fiction for children in the new socio-political context and incorporated new elements in the narratives. For instance, Flamur Topi's novel *Green Peace* is about the struggle of several humanist scientists to prevent the pollution of the seas by a capitalist corporation. The author claims that the novel was written in the early 1980s, but it did not get published at that time because it would have brought up the issue of pollution caused by Albania's outdated industrial plants.²⁷ In the works of new science fiction, more emphasis is given to adventurous plots than to scientific *novva*.²⁸ Elements of science fiction (i.e., the domination of the future Earth by artificial intelligence) are found in the novel *Çika në betejë me inteligjencën artificiale* (*Çika and the Battle against Artificial Intelligence*), written by Albana Osmani, a TV showwoman.²⁹ This novel is marketed as science fiction, but it can be better classified as epic fantasy, which is a new development in Albanian novels.

24 VLASH DOBRONIKU, *Lufta për jetën* (animated film), Tirana 1981.

25 For example, Thanas Qerama in 1993 published the book *20 vjet në kozmos* *20 Years in Cosmos*, which contained stories that have appeared in the press during the 1980s; in 2018 Arion Hysenbegas republished his book *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*.

26 For example, ARION HYSENBEGAS, *Lundrimi im i parë*, Tirana 1991; VANGJEL DILO, *SOS kozmik*, Tirana 2000; FLAMUR TOPI *Green Peace (Vdekja e detit)*, Tirana 2005.

27 A. BISHQEMI, *Histori e letërsisë shqiptare për fëmijë e të rinj*, p. 736.

28 Konstantin Leka (1932–2013), a physicist and mathematician who during the 1960s and 1970s worked in state radio and television, published the science fiction novel *Si u bëra i padukshëm*, Tirana 2009. The plot is about Lirian, a young man who while experimenting with salt crystals discovers by accident how to make bodies invisible. From this moment, Russian and American secret agencies spied on him to steal the formula, without realizing that the discovery was made possible by the outdated instruments that he used in his laboratory in Albania.

29 ALBANA OSMANI, *Çika në betejë me inteligjencën artificiale*, Tirana 2020.

The 1970s and 1980s, the period when Albanian science fiction flourished, was a time when the communist regime imposed nearly total isolation of the country from the outside world. After leaving the Soviet sphere in the 1960s, in the middle of the 1970s Albania severed relations with the only remaining ideological ally, the People's Republic of China. The new constitution of Albania, approved in 1976, sanctioned the collective socialist property as the only legal ownership; self-reliance was the guiding principle of development, and the constitution forbade the taking of foreign credits and debts; it outlawed any form of organized religion and proclaimed the Party of Labor as the sole political organization that guided the state and society according to the principles of Marxism–Leninism. The official propaganda described Albania as a socialist country that was marching toward the full realization of communist society, the teleological end of the Marxism–Leninist path of modernization. The horizon of the future was already known; therefore, the imagining of the future in science fiction works was structured in line with the reigning ideology. This explains to some extent why the genre was seen as part of literature devoted to children and adolescents.

Science fiction in Albania was seen as a free-time companion to science subjects in schools, to stimulate the imagination and help children and adolescents learn physics, mathematics, biology, etc. The scientific aspect predominated over the fantastic aspects, especially when it dealt with images of the future. Science fiction was part of socialist realist literature, and the latter should accurately describe the future according to the laws of historical materialism. As one literary critic of that time put it: “One of the fundamental aspects of literature and arts of socialist realism is the prediction of the future, but at the same time they are enemies of the fantastic predictions that are far from reality and against the tendencies of development and the essential interests of the working masses.”³⁰ Another critic explained that historical materialism had shown that social consciousness can penetrate so deep inside the social phenomena that in certain circumstances it could generate correct foresight about their development in the future. Marx and Engels made the most formidable prediction about the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of a classless society. The experience of the Albanian socialist revolution verified their prediction. Therefore, socialist realism, as a method that obeyed the laws of historical materialism, provided the writers with a sound and optimistic imagination of the future, but it does

30 RAQI MADHI, *Lufta e klasave në letërsi e arte në vendin tonë (1961–1981)*, Tirana 1984, p. 28.

not agree with “hollow, utopic dreaming and with the ornamentalization of the reality.”³¹

If in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries during the 1970s and 1980s, science fiction writers put into good use the détente with the West – for instance in a novel by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov there is a joint American–Soviet space station that establishes contact with a superior alien civilization³² – then in Albania, the writers of science fiction did not have such liberty to imagine rapprochement with the West (the teams of astronauts in novels are nearly always composed entirely by Albanians). Some writers in the socialist camp made veiled critiques of the communist regimes by employing the genre of science fiction, especially after the Chornobyl disaster,³³ but in Albania, such a thing could not materialize due to the repressive atmosphere, but also to the fact that the dedicated science fiction audience mostly consisted of children and adolescents. Also, it was not possible to write dystopian science fiction, because the future of Albania should always be portrayed in a positive light. On the other hand, the emphasis on the technological *nova* in science fiction literature at precisely the period when Albania’s obsolete industry turned into a heavy burden to the economy and the environment, was part of the ideological function of literature. The promise of an ever more technologically advanced and abundant future society, which children and adolescents read through the pages of science fiction novels and stories, was a smoke screen that obscured the reality of misery in the present. In the following section, we will attempt to construct an image of socialist Albania in the future, based on the cumulative *nova* spread in science fiction texts.

Socialist Albania in the Future

Although science fiction novels and stories are about the future, they remind readers about the present. The following panorama of Albania in various futures imagined by science fiction writers is the result of unbroken continuity with socialist Albania in the second half of the 20th century. In some of the texts, the story takes place in the future Albania, whose official name continues to be the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania, as it was named in the constitution

31 ADRIATIK KALLULLI, *Mbi partishmërinë proletare në letërsi dhe art*, Tiranë 1978, p. 213–215.

32 PATRICK MAJOR, *Future Perfect? Communist Science Fiction in the Cold War*, *Cold War History* 4/2003, no. 1, p. 85.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 86–89.

approved in 1976,³⁴ which meant that the communist stage still lay ahead.³⁵ The dates of national independence, liberation, and the founding of the republic continue to be celebrated after many decades, even centuries.³⁶ Most science fiction narratives are situated in unspecified times in the future, but in a few cases, when a date is given, it corresponds with significant dates of the 20th century. Thus, one of the novels is called *Një javë në vitin 2044*,³⁷ meaning ‘A Week in the Year 2044’, the one-hundredth anniversary of the liberation of Albania in World War II. The names of Albanian characters are the same as the ideologically approved names of young Albanians during socialism, which evoke the nation with its ancient ancestors, and socialism.³⁸

The socialist Albania of science fiction literature is a fully developed country. The *nova* in the texts is industrial plants, scientific institutes, and means of communication that are added to the familiar urban landscape of the 20th century. Tirana, the capital, is described with glassed skyscrapers and with aeromobiles that fly over it. On Dajti Mountain, near the capital, a tele-express, a high-speed telpher that within a few minutes transports people from its top to the city below, is installed. Near Dajti there is the Institute of Cosmic Travels, while on another hill near it there is the Cosmic Observatory. In another field in the vicinity of Tirana, there is a cosmodrome, from which Albanian spaceships take off. Public transportation³⁹ is upgraded to flying trains and there is an underground,

34 Before that, it was called the People’s Republic of Albania, according to the constitution approved in 1946. The adding of “socialist” in the official of name in the mid-1970s reflected the self-confidence of the communist leadership that it had constructed the material base of a socialist society.

35 ASTRIT BISHQEMI, *Përtej oborrit diellor*, Tirana 1978, pp. 95–96; ASTRIT BISHQEMI, *Udhëtim i jashëzakonshëm*, Tirana 1987, p. 64.

36 A. BISHQEMI, *Përtej oborrit diellor*, p. 95–96 ; VANGJEL DILO, *Takim me sjiçorët e Adës*, Tirana 1988, p. 5; TH. Qerama, *Një javë në vitin 2044*.

37 TH. Qerama, *Një javë në vitin 2044*.

38 After 1968, the state closed all religious institutions and encouraged Albanians to give their children “new” names instead of religious ones. For this purpose, a list of “correct” Albanian names was approved, some of which appear in science fiction literature: Illyrian names like Lydër, Teuta, Bato, Artan, Taulant, Genc, Ilir, Ergys, Agron, Pleurat; names evoking other “golden periods” of Albanian history, like Alban and Arbër (historical variants of Albania), Gjergj (evoking Gjergj Kastrioti, the Albanian national hero), Naim Dylja (evoking the nationalist activists of the 19th century, brothers Naim and Abdyl Frashëri), Çlirim (Liberation, referring to the liberation of the country after the World War II); names of places, like Drin (the largest river passing through Albania).

39 In socialist Albania no private cars were allowed.

interurban, high-velocity connection with the coastal city of Durrës.⁴⁰ Other examples of advanced technology found in science fiction novels and stories are submarine greenhouses for the cultivation of algae, the super-production of tractors, machines to travel underground, industrial plants built inside mountains, and the production of nuclear energy from the power of sea waves.⁴¹ Albanian pioneers travel through the cosmos and the spaceships carry names such as Pioneer-10, Afapi 72 (abbreviation of Fantastic Ship “Pioneer” 1972), Shqiponja (Eagle), Shqiponja 2244 (Eagle 2244),⁴² Fitorja (Victory), Ylli-6 (Star-6), while a space station is called Albania-2. Nature is completely under the control: earthquakes can be detected several hours in advance,⁴³ and hydro-meteorologic stations command airplanes that gather the clouds and send rain or snow wherever needed to enhance agricultural production. At the entrance of this hydro-meteorologic station one can read the slogan: “In the socialist society, the forces of nature obey the people.”⁴⁴ *Nova* are present in households too: Albanians use elevators to reach their apartments in multi-story blocs (elevators were a rarity in Albania in that day), remote controls for home appliances, videophones instead of the old telephones of the past, and robots to do things including homework.⁴⁵

Albanian scientists and children pioneers perform tasks in space that benefit their country and all humanity. Thus, an asteroid is named Teuta, after the Albanian female scientist who discovered it and a spaceship “parks” it in the Earth’s orbit, so that its valuable minerals could be extracted by specially built spaceships. These deeds are acknowledged by friendly countries seeking the help of Albanian cosmonauts. The Academy of Arab Countries asks the help of Albanian scientists to “park” another asteroid in Earth’s orbit because it contains reserves of water that could make the Sahara Desert productive.⁴⁶ Imperialists

40 BEDRI DEDJA, *Kërcënimi i thonjve kozmikë*, Tirana 1976, pp. 17–19; V. DILO, *Takim me yjorët e Adës*, pp. 5, 51; TH. QERAMA, *Roboti i pabindur*, Tirana 1981, pp. 5, 11.

41 A. BISHQEMI, *Udhëtim i jashtëzakonshëm*, Tirana 1987; BEDRI DEDJA, *Nëpër korridorët e thella të Jonit*, Tirana 1978, p. 38; TH. QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*; TH. QERAMA, *Fajtori i paduksbëm*, Tirana 1986, pp. 8, 53–54.

42 The year 2244 would be the 300th anniversary of liberation of Albania by the partisans from the Italian and German invaders. The commemoration date was November 29, 1944.

43 TH. QERAMA, *Roboti i pabindur*, p. 6.

44 B. DEDJA, *Kërcënimi i thonjve kozmikë*, pp. 3–12.

45 TH. QERAMA, *Roboti i pabindur*, pp. 3–29; THANAS QERAMA, *Dy rrugë drejt ylberit*, Tirana 1984, pp. 3–6.

46 V. DILO, *Takim me yjorët e Adës*. Socialist Albania considered itself a friend of Arab peoples, who were fighting against American imperialism and Soviet social imperialism. To that purpose, Enver Hoxha published the book *Shënime për Lindjen e Mesme (Notes on the Middle East)*, Tirana 1984, with extracts from his political diary.

are preoccupied with the advancements of Albania on earth and in space and try to impede them, without success.⁴⁷ The robots made in Albania, programmed to act and feel like humans, attract the awe of others as well as the envy of enemies. These robots not only fall in love with one another but also feel homesick when they have transported abroad,⁴⁸ another sign of the unyielding patriotism of future Albanians. The Albania of the future is at the forefront of the advancement towards communism; therefore, other socialist countries send delegations “to become acquainted with the experience of the Albanian Party of Labor for the full building of socialism and the passing towards communism.”⁴⁹

In most science fiction novels and stories, the heroes are children who initiate and undertake science and technological projects in schools, under the guidance of adult scientists and engineers and functionaries of the Party. The Organization of Pioneers oversees scientific circles, where the children undertake various experiments in electronics, hydrology, quantic physics, genetics, and space observation. Pioneers travel to other planets and meet with aliens.⁵⁰ Their intellect is more developed than that of adults in the 20th century, and their papers are published in scientific journals, while children in kindergarten can play classic symphonies.⁵¹ That this is not just fantasy but a real prospect of future development of socialist society is explained by an author of science fiction during the following imagined dialogue with present-day children:

Someone laughed at the symphonic orchestra in the kindergarten...

Edlira said: “Does History make a joke when it tells us that Mozart composed when he was four years old and Chopin five years old?”

“These were rare cases...”

Rrezarta said: “Yes, they were rare cases for capitalism, but for communism, they will not be rare. We will not be able to count the Mozarts of the future.”

Those who had protested to the kindergarten orchestra fell silent, while Taulant spoke the truest words: “For the time we are talking about the greatest miracle will

47 TH. QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*.

48 FLAMUR TOPI, *Dashuria e robotëve*, Tirana 1976, p. 79.

49 BARDHYL XHAMA, *Ekspedita e kaltër*, Tirana 1980, p. 163.

50 A. BISHQEMI, *Përtej oborrit diellor*; N. DEDA, ‘Gjyqi’ i Arkimedit; TH. QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*; TH. QERAMA, *Dy rrugë drejt ylberit*; TH. QERAMA, *Fajtori i paduksbëm*.

51 B. DEDJA, *Nëpër korridoret e thella të Jonit*. This is already a reality in contemporary socialist North Korea. Watch children performing in a concert at www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnehuC3miMI (last visited on March 24th, 2021).

happen: world capitalism will go down with all its lackeys, no mention that kindergarten children will be taught to play symphonic pieces.”

These words were almost greeted with hurrahs and the debate ended.⁵²

The adults who instruct and orient the scientific projects of children are scientists and communists. A scientist of the future, Entel, applied in his scientific projects the lessons he had learned from the founder of the Party, Enver Hoxha, about adjusting one's life and work to the conditions of the encirclement of capitalist and revisionist countries.⁵³ It is implied that the isolation of Albania would continue in the near future, until the triumph of the socialist revolution in the world, or at least in Europe. The Party of Labor continues to lead society, and the communists instruct the pioneers to be vigilantes against enemy spies and saboteurs.⁵⁴ As in every working collective, among the Albanian teams of cosmonauts who are the first humans to land on Mars, there is a communist who is the secretary of the Party cell organization of the expedition.⁵⁵

While Albania in the future will know no limits in the development of human capacities, the capitalist world will continue to fetishize commodities and money. According to a story by Flamur Topi, capitalist consciousness is transferred to the humanoid robots of the future that are produced in capitalist countries. One such intelligent robot, while giving a televised interview, expresses the desire to become a billionaire and an overlord over other robots and even over men. He betrays the racist beliefs of his white masters when he says: “What is the value of the flesh, bones, and blood of 10,000 negros compared to my electronic brain, S.D. 1250?”, and these words are met with approval by the white audience.⁵⁶ In another story from the same author, the hero named Hose is an orphan and homeless child of migrant parents in a Western capitalist country. Because he lives under a bridge, he becomes fatally ill and is sent to the hospital. As Hose has no family or friends, a scientist feels sorry for him and gives him a humanoid robot he has invented, the name of Robi, to make a company. Hose is very poor, the personnel in the hospital does not take care of him, and he is left to die. As the battery of Robi is charged through human contact, the robot “dies” soon afterwards. Upon hearing this, the inventor of the robot says to the doctor of Hose:

52 B. DEDJA, *Nëpër korridoret e thella të Jonit*, pp. 181–182.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

54 A. BISHQEMI, *Udhëtim i jashtëzakonshëm*, p. 100; TH. QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*, p. 139.

55 NIKO DEDA, *Eltari mbledh retë*, Tiranë 1976, p. 43.

56 F. TOPI, *Dashuria e robotëve*, pp. 68–69.

“Neither Robi nor thousands like him, will be able to change the fate of the patients coming from under the bridges.”⁵⁷ The moral of the story is that despite their technological sophistication, capitalist countries do not give equal value to all human life. A similar message is transmitted through Thanas Qerama’s story “The Catastrophe of Celestial Elevator.” Its hero is Poni Tutaki, a brilliant young man from a village in Africa who immigrates to a capitalist country where he manages to work as a janitor in an institute that deals with cosmic travels but secretly constructs nuclear arms. The genius of the African man is noticed by the white professors who exploit his inventions, giving him neither the credits nor the work position that he deserves. Tutaki’s greatest invention is a giant elevator to reach the artificial satellites of Earth. He naïvely believed that all humanity would benefit, but after the elevator is built, he sees that only the richest people make use of it for touristic journeys in space, and he learns about plans to use it for military purposes. His eyes finally open, and he decides to leave his invention unprotected so that it is destroyed by a cosmic storm. He escapes to his native village, hoping that “better times will come when peoples exploit the cosmos for their own needs. Then my invention will be put to good use.”⁵⁸

The children’s heroes of science fiction literature are not only more intelligent but also have a sound socialist consciousness, which is ingrained in many generations of Albanians that have passed since the victory of the socialist revolution in the 20th century. Thus, the pioneers travelling in the spaceship Afapi 72 follow with interest the work of their compatriots in science, industry, etc., because they know that they are “a cell, like other countless cells of the body of the homeland, working for the latter’s glory.”⁵⁹ In another novel, two pioneers travelling with an underground vehicle suddenly realize that their friends in a village have finished school and are volunteering in a nearby agricultural cooperative. The two pioneers take an oath that upon the end of their travels, they will return to the village to do their share of the volunteer work.⁶⁰ The pioneers of the future are taught to lead a collective life. One of them, Altin, after reading a fantastic story about an invisible man, for a moment dreams about becoming invisible to others. He thinks of it as pure fantasy, until a scientist explains to him that theoretically is it possible for anybody to become invisible when it stops reflecting the light it receives. This makes Altin think again about his invisibility, this time as a po-

57 F. TOPI, *Dasburia e robotëve*, p. 13.

58 TH. QERAMA, *Roboti i pabindur*, p. 137.

59 A. KRISTO, *Një jetë në anije*, p. 33.

60 A. BISHQEMI, *Udhëtim i jashtëzakonshëm*, pp. 83–84.

tential realization, and he decides that it would be useless, because “there is nothing greater than to work and live among our wonderful people.”⁶¹

What makes Albanian pioneers brave and proud is not only socialist collective consciousness but also national identity: when two boys think that they are abducted by aliens in a flying saucer, they think that they have become the prisoners of the aliens, so one of them says to the other: “We should not be taken by surprise. Let’s stay calm and be brave. Let these savage creatures of the cosmos see that the Albanians know how to die.”⁶² In another science fiction story, Marin, a schoolboy, watches a documentary about the first tractors produced in socialist Albania⁶³ and, although the present state of technology has far surpassed that of the 20th century, he feels proud about the first generation of Albanians that constructed socialism with its own forces: “That generation is always mentioned in history as a glorious generation, as a generation that fought against the invaders and founded the republic in which we live today.”⁶⁴ So strong is the Albanians’ patriotism that they have transmitted it to the humanoid robots they have constructed. In the robots “made in Albania” the love for their country is stronger even than the love for another robot. When a foreign robot courts an Albanian female robot and tries to persuade “her” to stay in the foreign country, “she” refuses “him”: “More than my Gent [her robot husband], more than thousands of Gents, I love my country. I was born there. I hold dear every particle of its soil.”⁶⁵

An interesting transformation of patriotism is observed in the novel *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* (*Towards Epsilon Eridani*), by Arion Hysenbegas, which is the only science fiction not set in a “near future.” At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Olton, an Albanian astronaut in the year 2474, has just recently returned to Earth after spending two years in a colony on Mars. During his stay on the red planet, he felt a deep longing for Earth and terrestrial objects: “I had a great yearning for dear Earth, for every person, for every stone, for every tree, for anything on it. A similar love our ancestors must have felt for their homeland. A similar love our descendants will have for our solar system and, maybe, who knows, for our galaxy.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, this enlargement of belonging, from

61 N. DEDA, *Eltari mbledh retë*, p. 42.

62 TH. QERAMA, *Roboti i pabindur*, p. 56.

63 In 1978, the first tractor was assembled in the country, and this was hailed as a great achievement by the regime, because it demonstrated that socialist Albania could modernize its economy without foreign assistance.

64 TH. QERAMA, *Fajtori i paduksëm*, pp. 53–54.

65 F. TOPI, *Dasburia e robotëve*, p. 90.

66 A. HYSENBEGAS, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, p. 4.

the love of homeland to love of the earth to love for the solar system, does not erase historical patriotism. Olton, after his cosmic trip, chooses to spend his holidays on the Adriatic Sea and enjoy the view of coastal Albania. Looking at the natural beauties and technological and scientific advancements in the coastal cities and those under the sea, he recalls the historical struggle of his people for freedom: “I have always especially loved the Adriatic Sea. This love has not diminished with the passing of years. Maybe because the Adriatic washes the coast, the land where my people have always lived and continue to live, where every stone, every particle of our earth has been washed with the pure blood of my proud ancestors, who have loved freedom so much and have never yielded to the storms.”⁶⁷ Because this novel’s plot is set in a distant future and space, far from Earth, it is largely free of the crude propaganda about national communism that is observed in most science fiction works by Albanian authors. In a few pages describing life on Earth in the year 2474, we learn that humanity is politically unified and in a technologically advanced stage, implying the achievement of communism. Albania is simply described as a “district of Earth,” the Sahara is made green, and many cities and factories that use solar energy from the sun are constructed in the former desert. The end of capitalism brought the end of wars and the destruction of atomic arsenals that imperialists had amassed throughout the 20th century. The crew of the spaceship *Comet* is clearly multicultural, although we never learn the provenance of other members, except for the Albanian Olton, who is the captain. The few references to workers and patriotism, as well as its long passages on astronomy and physics, helped *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* pass through the censure of editors and offer to the readers a glimpse of a cosmopolitan future world that was radically different from what the communist regime called the “imperialist-revisionist encirclement” of Albania. In terms of the balance between cognitive and estrangement elements, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit* could pass Suvin’s test as a mature work of science fiction.

Unlike *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, other science fiction novels and stories describe a future Albania still encircled by ideological enemies who envy the existence of a sovereign and socialist state, which is superior in many respects to them.⁶⁸ The capitalists of the future continue to envy the geostrategic position of Albania and its natural riches. In the novel *Një javë në vitin 2044 (A Week in the Year 2044)*, John, a spy of a capitalist state, has in his possession a diary of

67 A. HYSENBEGAS, *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, p. 6.

68 B. DEDJA, *Nëpër korridoret e thella të Jonit*, p. 87; TH. QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*, p. 34; B. XHAMA, *Ekspedita e kaltër*, p. 163; B. XHAMA, *Ekspedita e kaltër*, p. 163.

his grandfather, who wrote secret information about how under the sea near Durrës lie oil reserves. His grandfather was a Nazi officer on a secret mission in Albania during the war, and one hundred years later, John has the same mission: to prevent the Albanians from profiting from their natural resources, hoping that one day socialism will collapse, and capitalist countries will exploit them. But his efforts at sabotage are unsuccessful and the Albanian oil platform starts extracting oil under the seabed.⁶⁹

According to a science fiction novel devoted to adult readers, the global struggle between socialism and capitalism that takes place on Earth is part of the universal laws of the evolution of beings. It happens or has happened on other planets that are inhabited by intelligent beings. An alien by the name Martilius from the planet Kato (an anagram of “Toka,” the Albanian word for “Earth”) in the 1970s lands in Albania and meets with a young adult named Stefan. During their conversations about life on earth, Martilius asks Stefan about the capitalists. After hearing Stefan’s explanation that there are no capitalists in Albania but that they dominate the rest of the world, Martilius tells his friend that hundreds of years ago Kato was similarly ruled by the “cilatipak” (an anagram of “kapitalist,” the Albanian word meaning “capitalist”), until they were overthrown by the Great Revolution, which ends the private property and signalled the dawn of a new era in Kato.⁷⁰ When he lands on Kato, Stefan sees with his own eyes a more developed society than he has experienced in his own country. Nothing is sold or bought because objects are used according to one’s needs.⁷¹ He is impressed by the small number of newspapers that circulate in Kato, while on Earth there are thousands of them. Martilius explains the reason: “In your world, there is a class war and newspapers are used for propaganda, while our newspapers publish the most important news in our world.”⁷² In a film about the history of Kato, Stefan observes the similarities with the history of the Earth. A Katian historian says that the reason is that both worlds develop according to the same laws of the universe: “The difference is that our life has started before yours. Human society never stays still. It develops from a lower state towards a higher one. One day you will come in our state of civilization, while we will have moved forward.”⁷³

69 TH. QERAMA, *Një javë në vitin 2044*.

70 A. KRISTO, *Shëtitje në kozmos*, p. 25.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

The travel of Stefan to Kato resembles the science fiction novel *Red Star* by Alexander Bogdanov, first published in 1908. Its protagonist, Leonid, a Russian communist, is sent with a spaceship to the planet Mars, where he finds a society organized according to the principles of communism. A Martian says to Leonid: “Blood is being shed [down on Earth] for the sake of a better future. But to wage the struggle, we must know that future. And it is for the sake of such knowledge that you are here.”⁷⁴ In another imagined encounter of Albanians with alien civilizations, this time on a planet called Lin, again the alien society resembles that of humankind, but the former is more developed than the latter due to the total nonexistence of private property. Although the Albanian pioneers obviously are familiar with the socialist system, they are nevertheless impressed by the total absence of money and private holdings in Lin, which means that “there are no capitalists here,” as one of the children explains to her friend.⁷⁵ Besides the absence of private property, another feature of the alien worlds in Albanian science fiction novels is that they seem to be united and not divided in numerous states like humanity on Earth. The more developed alien humanoid societies that are described in such science fiction works serve as a mirror to the socialist Albania of the 20th century. In other words, they demonstrate that Albania has chosen the true path that would lead to a brighter future towards communism. It is interesting to observe that although the main characteristic of these alien societies is the total absence of private property and social classes, none of those societies is described as formally being a communist. They seem to be in a more advanced level of socialism, and by implication, communism lies ahead as a horizon to be reached by all intelligent and social creatures in the cosmos, although in different times.

Conclusion

By emphasizing the dialectical interaction of the empirical world with what sounds strange but at the same time plausible now or in the future, science fiction opens critical interrogation of what shapes the normality of readers’ societies and cultures. Authors and scientists living under authoritarian regimes have written works of science fiction to publish veiled social and political critique, while on the other hand, authoritarian regimes have tried to police the genre and enlist it in their repertoires of propaganda. Science fiction developed in com-

74 Cited in P. MAJOR, *Future Perfect?*, p. 74.

75 A. BISHQEMI, *Përtej oborrit diellor*, p. 69.

munist Albania in the 1970s and 1980s as a subgenre of children's literature. As such, its function was to assist the education in sciences and inspire children to take up higher education and careers as scientists and technicians. Out of twenty-four science fiction novels and story collections published during this period, only two novels were to be read by (young) adult readers. Thus, the estrangement function for which science fiction is valued could not be present in the way it took shape in Albania, at a time when the country was almost completely isolated from the rest of the world and no means of alternative publication existed except the state's publishing houses.

Besides, science fiction literature was permeated by communist ideology, the Albanian version of Stalinism. The latter's effect on the readers was fused with the cognitive effect. Albanian children and adolescents who read science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s learned that progress was unstoppable, cumulative, and limitless; therefore, their expectations for the future were the possession of more advanced technological utilities which would expand the range of overall achievements of Albanian society. Of course, travel in space would seem to lie far ahead, but as it was something that other states had already achieved, it was within the reach of a modern society that was based on science. Albanian children and adolescents could imagine themselves as future rocket scientists and cosmonauts. On the other hand, science fiction assured them that they and future generations of children would grow up and live in a socialist nation-state. In a sense, the Albanian pioneers of the ages to come could "invade" space, but the borders of their socialist republic would remain inviolable forever, or at least until the whole of humanity became socialist. These science fiction authors wrote about various technological innovations and scientific inventions, but at the same time, most of them simply projected the Stalinist Albania of the present into the future, thus implying a timeless Stalinism. In the present time of nearly complete isolation and xenophobia, maybe it was a mental escape for them to describe the Albanian pioneers of the future travelling in space. But even in space they could not but describe Albanians as isolated: Albanian pioneers meet their counterparts from alien civilizations, but they neither meet nor cooperate with children from other states of their world. A partial exception from the rule was Hysenbegas's novel *Drejt Epsilonit të Eridanit*, which presented a glimpse of a cosmopolitan world, without state borders and oppression, and without party secretaries.

Literary utopias cannot totally escape the present, and in some science fiction the present figures as history, but in the Albanian case of science fiction, the present depleted the future. The Albanian societies to come obeyed the same Marxist-Leninist eschatology as the present one. Even alien humanoid civili-

zations were described as being at an advanced stage of socialism, the socialism of the world state. The political imagination conveyed to the Albanian readers of science fiction was that of perpetual Stalinism, precisely at a time when the socioeconomic system of socialism had exhausted its energies and would collapse earlier than the “the nearest future” foreseen in science fiction for children sponsored by the regime.