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Film Advertising in the Albanian Press before World War II

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Abstract: This paper aims at studying the development of film advertising in the 1930's Albanian press. Through advertising we struggle to read a piece of the Albanian monarchy's history. Considering advertising as a historical source tends to reflect the economic, social and cultural life of the country. The study focused on the features, characteristics and uniqueness of advertising the films in relation to other ads present in print. Who were the people who created the ads, how does the Albanian press film advertising compare to advertising in the foreign press and what were the difficulties facing advertising at this time, are the other important issues addressed in this study. Over a century has passed since Harper's Weekly wrote that 'advertisements are a reflection of real life, a kind of fossil by which chroniclers can rewrite history in order to complete the graphic, even if all other historical evidence may have disappeared⁴.

Keywords: film advertising; Albanian press; history

1. Methodology

The completion of this study is based on official documents of the time, the primary data collected from the survey and press search of the 30s as well as interviews with historians and actors of this period. The selection of newspapers and magazines in the study is done based on the duration and frequency selection criterion, since it is difficult to find accurate data on circulation and sales. To carry out this study we were also supported by previous work in this area by Albanian and foreign authors.

Notwithstanding personal taste we are surrounded by advertising today. The origins of advertising have become apparent with the first traces of human social life and interaction. A unique display of advertising is apparent in the primitive human who hauled hunting surpluses and displayed them to his peers in order to exchange them with other items. In antiquity we are presented with a full array of signs and symbols that replaced early displays with a more sophisticated advertising language.

The evolution and development of the history of advertising is interrelated to economic, social and cultural advances of society, an evolution that has owed its recent rapid development to the advances in the field of media technology. The Guttenberg's printing press, one of the most important inventions of the fifteenth century, gave another dimension to advertising. G The press was the most

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important development not only in the history of advertising and communications, but also revolutionized the way people lived and worked (Arens, 2004). Thus, the first print ads dates back to the year 1472 in England, a booklet attached to every church door announcing the sale of a prayer book. About 200 years after, advertisement was present in every British newspaper.

The 1930's in Albania was a period during which the press was in the vanguard of modernization and the drive towards the Europeanization of the country, which was gradually breaking its Ottoman ties . It gave way to the establishment of new western-educated intellectual and political elite which gradually began to be prevalent in all structures of Albanian society: politics, art, education, social administration etc. (Borici & Marku, 2010)

The rapid media communication development in this period, especially in the written press, led the way in recognizing the lack of the Albanian Cinema, and requesting, through its mediums of communication, the opening of new theatres. Thus, on the 22nd of June 1926 Tirana opened the first cinema called "Nacional" (during World War II it was known as the "REX Cinema" and during the Communist period "November 17"). Rapidly following the opening in Tirana, Nasional cinema founder Jusuf Beshir, followed with branches in other key cities in Albania such as: Shkodra, Durrës, Kavaja, Elbasan, Pogradec, Berat, Gjirokastër etc. The rapid expansion of movie theaters gave a strong momentum to the development of advertising through and for this medium. In his book Cinema Society researcher Julian Bejko says that 'the film is a fanatic preserver of the past, the evolution in the form of artistic representation, partly embodied in the image of the lives of living beings The film is the producer of the reality, inventor but also a representative and unavoidable source of human life (Bejko, 2012). Film advertising seems to adhere to the same concept.

Textual advertising seems to be the dominant method of advertising releases in the early '20 whereas it is not until the 1930s when magazines and newspapers of the period like: Diana, Minerva, Albanian Effort, Arbena, Democrats, etc, began printing full page color advertisements for these releases.

Increased presence of advertising illustrated with image (image) and printed in color:



Figure 1. Advertising in movie theaters Rozafat

Library research shows that during the 1930's movie advertisements received greater advertising space in the press when compared to advertising for consumer products and services. Furthermore, within a short period of time, advertisement for movie theater releases was listed as the first in the country. These ads were high quality, artistically realized, especially as they were created by renowned painters

as Ibrahim Kodra, Guri Madhi, etc. most of whom were educated in the West as cities in Albania lacked a proper art academy. “Nasional” cinema employed the services of renowned (now world famous) artist Ibrahim Kodra. Even when the rights to releases were acquired with the printed, relevant posters as a package, these same ads were recreated in larger proportions by local portraitists and affixed on the main streets of the capital such as : Barrikada way, November 28th, Vellezerit Bashiri etc.

Cinema advertising was distinctive because of these various posters which were placed throughout the city. These posters had to be as expressive and capture the essence of the film and its magic quite succinctly (Kodra, 2011, p. 48). While in Korca it was Madhi, a stone painter by trade, who created the movie release advertising that appeared on Lux cinemas and Majestik. (Hado, 2004)

Cinema in the '30s played the role of a cultural institution and orientation to occidental culture and American society in particular, through a medium that also an exciting contrivance. Movies appearing in Albanian cinemas at the time were the same as those appearing in the West and the United States and the posters were graced by the same Hollywood stars and starlets.

“*Nasional Cinema*” owner and founder acquired contracts with motion picture societies in Italy, Greece and Germany, which were provided with Hollywood releases. The primary company which dealt with the procurement of these releases was E.N.I.C.A¹. Amongst the western produced titles which appeared in the Albanian cinema network the following are the most noticeable: *Mother and baby* (bought by a group of Albanians in Boston), *The man who laughs*, *Last Days of a Prisoner Sentenced to Death*, *The King of Fun*, *Secret Black*, *Thief of Hearts*, *Modern Times*, etc. The target audience segmentation was also reveals interesting facts as younger audiences, especially in the capital, were more prone to attend the “Rosafa” releases, whereas “Nasional” targeted more family-oriented releases.



Figure 2. Movie ads in cinemas Nasional

The influence of cinema in the development of the cultural and artistic lifestyle of the country in this period can be deemed as highly effective. Furthermore, the advent of Western films introduced the Western lifestyle and behavior to the Albanian general public which lacked general knowledge on that culture. The cinema offered a unique advantage to the quality and quantity of advertising, as it could be followed by the general public unlike the other mediums that were offered (newspapers and

¹ Interview with Nuri Beshiri, son of Jusuf Beshiri, owner and founder of Nasional movie theater.

magazines), which had had fewer buyers as 97% of the population of 1930's Albania was illiterate. Cinema audiences had a rather low educational level; illustrated on a recollection of Nuri Beshiri, son of the founder of the first cinema in Albania, who recalls an audience member throwing a gun in the direction of the scene during the preview of a war-related release (he did so to aid the good guy in eliminating the enemy). This very same group was also the receptor of the illustrated advertisement that depicted the releases. Commercially, motion pictures and cinema related activities were profitable even though they were highly regulated by the state.

Annual balance sheets and financial data for the Nasional chain of theaters show that annual profits reached a few thousand gold francs. Cinema tickets were originally purchased in blocks printed by the Ministry of Finance, which held 25% of the amount, and then were sold to the general public. Through this scheme, the state was able to control the possibility to abuse with the price of a ticket and any informality in the transactions. Financial data for the advertising costs for the Nasional cinema were missing. Nonetheless, according to Mr. Beshir, painter Ibrahim Kodra was very well paid to replicate the advertising. However, the painter Guri Madhi refers to the salary as enough for "a piece of bread, but this work attracted me a lot as it was the only way to help somehow economically." (Hado, 2004)

Movie title advertisement were present in the pages of the local press, whereas religious press, which was quite elitist and developed in the '30s (for example: the religious magazine "The Voice Upwards" - a publication of the Albanian Muslim Community, The Star of Light etc.) lacked any movie advertisement.



Figure 3. The advertisement for "Follie di Brodway", 1936

During the years of King Zog I the high degree of illiteracy limited the number of consumers (buyers of newspapers and magazines) and clients (businesses that post ads in newspapers and magazines). The press, following the triumph of the legality (monarchy), was considered and modeled as the "property" or a "right of the intellectual elite" of the city dwellers. Journalism was exclusively

reserved to the intelligentsia. This group wrote and published articles for a very small and privileged group of readers as most of the population was poorly educated and illiterate especially the ones living in the rural areas” (Borici & Marku, 2010). According to an article published by the magazine “Diana” the number of readers in Albania during these years reached “twenty some odd thousand readers”¹. However, how did the press function? According to the researchers Hamit Borici and Mark Marku, a characteristic of the press of 1925-1939 period was that the publishing of newspapers and magazines was an intellectual undertaking of one person or a small group rather than a proper and organized business enterprise. Therefore, they were unstable, short lived and without any significant impact on public life². However, according to the writings of the publishers of this period, some magazines or newspapers were able to function as proper businesses and were profitable. In an article published in 1936, the chief editor of the Minerva magazine, Nebil Cika writes: “Minerva is very dear to me, and it will be, and here is why: it has provided security in my life, a life that is materially and morally sound, for three straight years. Thanks to it I was not involved in any murky dealings never and nowhere.”³. According to Cika, Minerva (a bi-weekly publication) sold 2000 copies, whereas Arbënija 2800 copies⁴. The editorial board of the magazine Diana, in a riposte with the Minerva magazine, amongst other things wrote: “it is enough to say that the magazine Diana is well received, circulates over 2000 prints and there is no part of it that does not serve the cultural development of the country”⁵. The monetary stipulation and the value of the market for advertisement including the specific weight that movie advertising held in the entire revenues collected by magazines through advertising is difficult to calculate since there is no official data. The only official notice is on the first page of some newspapers: This is ad is prepaid or we prearrange special agreements for advertisement. A distinct feature of the advertisements of this period is that it is always missing from the front page; it is usually on the second, second to last or last. Comparatively, today, front page ads are on the highest demand.

2. Conclusions

The development of advertising during the reign of King Zog has been in line with the development of the press. Advertisement in the 1930’s was very qualitative and well realized, and it either came from abroad as part of a package with the product, or was realized by accomplished painters like Ibrahim Kodra, Guri Madhi etc. Movie advertising were at the same level as those that were present in the Western world. During this period, the cinema played the role of a cultural institution and it was crucial in its orientation of the society towards an occidental culture rather than just providing entertainment. Albanian theaters at the time were displaying the same features that were displayed in the western and American theaters, including the same advertisement. The advantage of cinema in those years was that was followed by a broad public educated or not, while newspapers and magazines had fewer buyers which has also affected the quality and quantity of advertising. The high rate of illiteracy in this period was a serious obstacle to the press and simultaneously printed advertisement.

¹ The magazine in the West and amongst us. *Diana*, Year III, December 1938, Nr.44.

² Borici, Hamit. Marku, Mark. *History of the Albanian Press*. University printing press, Tiranë, 2010.

³ On the fourth anniversary, a few words to the readers of Minerva. Cika, Nebil. *Revista Minerva*, Year IV, Nr. 37, Janar 1936.

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⁵ A proposition to our journals. *Diana*, Viti III, December 1938, No 44.

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