

ECHO III: For Memory's Sake Research Paper

ECHO III

For Memory's Sake

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The ECHO III: For Memory's Sake Creative Project: Exploring Arranged Marriage in the Balkans through Personal Testimonies and Artistic Creation

Abstract

Balkan history and culture are often presented as a homogenous sum of backwardness, responsible for a stereotypical heritage of violence and conflict. Controversially, this negative heritage is justified on the irreconcilable antagonism of solid ethno-religious identities. On the contrary, contemporary research shows that Balkan identities are full of ambiguities, similarities and differences, in a constant process of redefinition and reconstruction. In specific, the traditional practice of arranged marriage is a common element between different societies and cultures across the Balkans. However, the extent to which they are practiced has varied over time and country. In some communities, arranged marriages were more common in the past, but have declined in recent years as younger generations have adopted more westernized ideas about love and relationships. In other communities, arranged marriages remain a strong cultural tradition, and are seen as a way to preserve family and cultural values. The present paper deals with the "ECHO III: For Memory's Sake" creative project, which explored tradition and culture of arranged marriages in four Balkan countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania) through research and artistic creation in the fields of theater, music, visual arts, and literature. The ECHO III project attempted to explore gender roles and norms in the Balkans throughout history and how they affect the lives of people. In the framework of the project, interviews with people that have experienced arranged marriage themselves were conducted. Based on these interviews, a creative process that followed, produced artworks aiming at a sensory, emotional approach to the dark heritage practice of arranged marriages. Research showed that arranged marriage practices in the Balkans bear commonalities and differences influenced by cultural and historical factors, and that there is an intergenerational transmission of trauma related to marriage in the aforementioned countries. The artistic results offered artistic interpretations and reflections on the subject of ECHO III providing insights on arranged marriages and their cultural significance in the Balkan space. Overall, research and artistic creation point at a shared cultural heritage in the region which, despite individual differences, transcend national and linguistic boundaries.

Keywords: Balkans, cultural projects, marriage, microhistory, ethnography, socially engaged art, gender-responsive approach, difficult/dark heritage

1. Introduction

Arranged marriage is a traditional practice that has defined the family lives of different generations in the Balkans. Arranged marriage, as a marital union where the marriage is decided and the future couple is selected by a third party (the parents, family or a matchmaker), does not only have an impact on the lives of the people (mostly women) directly involved. It also casts its shadow on following generations by influencing intimate relationships, social behavior, and ultimately gender roles.

The ECHO III: For Memory's Sake project, aimed at exploring gender roles and norms in the Balkans throughout history and how they affect the lives of people in four specific countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. This exploration and reflection was based on field research, visual analysis of selected films, and subsequently expressed through artistic creation. The project incorporated testimonies and interviews with individuals who had experienced arranged marriages. These testimonies and interviews served as a source for artists to create artworks that aimed to entertain audiences and also creatively document Balkan cultural history and traditions.

Research conducted in the four Balkan countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania) of the project showed that there are both common (young age of brides, quitting school by brides) and different (age difference between spouses, dowry, marriage mediators) dimensions of arranged marriage highlighted by the data sources. In addition, cultural and historical factors have influenced marital practices in the Balkans. Lastly, there appears to be an intergenerational transmission of trauma related to marriage.

The original artworks created during the ECHO III project, as a result of the research, offered artistic interpretations and reflections on the subject of arranged marriage, providing additional perspectives on arranged marriages and their cultural significance in the Balkans. Overall, research and artistic creation point at a shared cultural heritage in the region which, despite individual differences, transcend national and linguistic boundaries.

In total, ECHO III: For Memory's Sake provided a study of gender norms, marriage practices, and the role of women in the Balkan region through research and artistic creation. It showcased the power of art in exploring and reimagining cultural traditions, shedding light on the experiences of individuals in arranged marriages, and promoting discussions on equality, tradition, and identity in the Balkans. Lastly, ECHO III suggests that understanding past traditions and practices can help address gender inequality and social constraints of the present.

2. Conceptual Framework

Micro-Level Approaches in the Balkans

Microhistory, micro-level research and analysis are useful in illuminating aspects often outside the scope of macro or global history and macro-level analysis. Microhistory aims to show both the extent of and the limits upon human agency by illuminating the trials and tribulations of ordinary people in their everyday lives (Ginzburg et al. 1993). Microhistory also emphasizes on a singular place rather than space and the careful delineation of particularities and details (Brewer, 2010). Likewise, micro-sociology studies face-to-face social encounters in everyday life and interpersonal behavior in small groups (Abercrombie et al. 2006). Micro-level analysis is based on the recognition that our understanding depends on the incorporation of many points of view rather than the use of a single dominant perspective (Brewer, 2010). Although research on different levels of analysis might be often perceived as antagonistic, in fact it can be complementary in bringing out different elements from different micro, meso, and macro perspectives. In this sense, microhistory can observe aspects of large historical processes that would remain invisible under the homogenous categories of macrohistory (Levi, 1991). Therefore, contemplation from the micro to the global and back could fruitfully enhance historical research (de Vries, 2019).

Regarding the Balkans, there are several scholars who have conducted micro-level research. Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova has conducted extensive research on the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Europe, and the Balkan Peninsula. Her book "Imagining the Balkans" (Todorova, 2009) is a seminal work in Balkan studies as it reveals the ways in which the Balkans have been victimized, mythologized, and stereotyped in the Western imagination, perpetuating a specific discourse on the region. Croatian historian Vjekoslav Perica in his book "Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States" (Perica, 2002) explores the role of religion in shaping national identity in the Balkans and debunks the claim that a clash of civilizations led to aggression, violence and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Dutch anthropologist Ger Duijzings, in his "Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo" (Duijzings, 2000) through ethnographic research, challenges the notion that Balkan conflicts have evolved around fixed ethno-religious groups. German social anthropologist Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers for more than twenty years has been researching and publishing on the construction and reconstruction of the Albanian and Kosovar identities (Schwandner-Sievers, 2019; Schwandner-Sievers & Fischer, 2002).

Arranged Marriage in the Balkans

Arranged marriage is defined as the marital union in which intended spouses are selected by parents or respected elders of the bride and groom, with variations and differences depending on the social context (O'Brien, 2009). Arranged marriage is a traditional structure often essentialized in a binary opposition with the autonomous marriage. This essentialization is usually western-centric and exaggerates cultural differences. In this sense,

arranged marriage is expected to eventually adapt to the Western ways, and advance into autonomous marriage, as a sign of emancipation, of progress (Tahir, 2021). However, the western, individualist model of consent is difficult to transpose onto the reality of familial responsibility and engagement (Ballard, 2009) in the marriage process within different cultural communities. The arranged marriage process is heavily reliant on parental and sometimes extended family input and as such, fails to measure up to such requirements of consent (Shariff, 2012). The motivation behind arranged marriage may be to ensure the children's future, to meet financial ends, to strengthen family ties, to uphold commitments, or to protect and preserve cultural or religious ideals and traditions (Rauf et al. 2013).

Arranged marriage and forced marriage are often equated or connected in the literature. Although they constitute two different terms, there is often an overlap between the two, recognized as a gray area where increased duress may lead the arranged marriage to turn into a forced one (Tahir, 2021). Arranged marriage, when it is forced or coerced, constitutes a form of violence. Victims of forced marriage can experience significant abuse, which may lead to mental health problems (Rauf et al. 2013). Reportedly, common psychological effects are depressed mood, irritability, low self-esteem, rage, frustration, sleep problems, difficulty in forming relationships and difficulty trusting others. In addition, other mental health problems are self-harming, self-cutting, anorexia, and drug and alcohol misuse (Rele, 2007). In legal terms, forced marriage is widely recognized at a global level as a violation of women's and children's human rights. However, in specific countries there is a clear distinction between arranged marriage and forced marriage. Arranged marriage is defined as the case where parents or relations help future spouses select potential suitors, but the consent to proceed to marriage rests with the couple. Forced marriage is where there is no full and free consent in the marriage, and duress (such as physical, financial, or emotional violence) is exercised (Chantler, 2012). Nevertheless, this distinction, based on the contested term of consent, is under scrutiny from researchers, as it is argued that consent is context-bound and embedded within power relations rather than an act of pure individual agency (Anitha & Gill, 2009).

In the Balkans demographic and anthropological studies have demonstrated that marriage patterns have exhibited such great variability that it is difficult to classify them in any of the marriage patterns typologies (Gavalas, 2008). Arranged marriage was quite common until recently and is still practiced in some communities, especially in rural areas. In the early 1910s, women from northern Albania did not have the right to choose their husbands and consequently they did not have the right to voice their opinion on any family matter. Marriages were arranged by elders, usually before the parties had reached maturity. Men were matched to a family judged as suitable for local alliances and political reasons. Women were sold to the families of their future husbands in infancy or in early childhood. In the tribal context they were the tribesmen's property (Tarifa, 2007). On other occasions, arranged marriage was a means to maintain cultural "purity". In the 20th century

(1900-1950) Voyvodovo, Bulgaria, Czech/Slovak speaking Protestant families encouraged endogamy in order to protect their religious identity, maintain family social and economic status and keep young people in their village and farmland. In case young people did not internalize these values, parents 'inspired' the young, manipulated their choices or arranged marriages using a variety of strategies, from mediation or negotiation to more coercive actions (Jakoubková Budilová, 2020). In recent years, the arranged marriage practice has been on the decline although in some communities it is a common practice. In the post-communist era Romania, Roma people in Transylvania villages favored arranged marriages and ethnic endogamy, and cross-cousin marriages were common. However, arranged marriages are not the rule since many young people used to find their own spouses and consequently asked for their parents' consent. Social structure is based on patrilineal extended families that are physically and economically independent. Roma extended families are connected with each other through kinship or marriage and form a politically and socially corporate group, where every family head is politically equal to all others (Engebriksen, 2011). Research in Kosovo indicates a patriarchal culture, centered on traditional family life, where marriages are arranged by families, and before puberty girls are promised to young boys that they might not meet or even see, before the day of marriage. Girls usually stop going to school before high school level and comply with a gender-based division of work and everyday life (Demaria, 2020). In Greece, arranged marriage belonged to the traditions of the institution of marriage. Arranged marriage was the basis of marriage both on a social and economic level. Arranged marriage was that act that granted recognition to the role of the future parents, mainly the father, and determined the dowry to be given to the couple. The role of the matchmaker was very important. In various regions of Greece the matchmaker had to go to the bride's house holding a lit lantern, otherwise she would not be accepted. In other cases the matchmaker disguised herself in order to avoid outside interventions that would harm the arranged marriage. The spouses rarely had a say in the process and decision-making. The decisions were taken by the parents based on the interest of their children and if they agreed on the dowry they proceeded with the marriage. As outdated as it may seem, the institution of arranged marriage is still valid today although it has transformed with the role of the matchmaker taken over by specialized matchmaking agencies, through newspaper ads, and online dating sites (Merakles, 2011).

Arranged Marriage and Intangible Heritage

Arranged marriage practices are considered to be part of the intangible cultural heritage of the Balkan region and its communities. According to the UNESCO Convention (UNESCO, 2003), Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) or living heritage spans across five domains: oral traditions (including language), performing arts, social practices and rituals/festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. Arranged marriages fall at least within one ICH domain, that of social practice which includes ritual elements. Since the practice of arranged marriage concerns relationships between members of a family, the broader community and society, it also involves gender-specific

roles in the various manifestations of the ICH practice. ICH is enlivened, reproduced, performed, created and transmitted in the interplay of human relations.

The collective dimension is one of the defining features of ICH, in which communities, societies, groups and individuals are fundamental actors. However, the UNESCO ICH convention does not provide a specific definition for communities, recognising its fluid and multi-faceted meaning by permitting freedom to conceptualise in a variety of ways the diverse communities. A community can thus refer to a family or a broader social setting of formal and informal groups. ICH is a powerful driver of both, the reproduction of gender norms and their transformation within communities. The formation of gender dynamics is considered a complex process influenced by power relations and rooted in cultural systems. Gender norms and beliefs shape the way ICH is experienced and performed. This may include culturally-specific practices where gender roles are at play and which contribute to building gender specificity within a community. The operational directives of the ICH Convention pay special attention to the role of gender, addressing gender equality as one out of five main categories for sustainable development and in particular inclusive social development:

"State Parties shall endeavor to foster the contribution of intangible cultural heritage and its safeguarding to greater gender equality and to eliminating gender-based discrimination while recognizing that communities and groups pass on their values, norms and expectations related to gender through intangible cultural heritage, and it is, therefore, a privileged context in which group and community members' gender identities are shaped." (UNESCO, 2022)

Heritage can thus be understood as a process through which identities, including gender identities and sociocultural meaning, are mediated and worked out (Blake, 2016). In long-held traditions, gender roles may seem entrenched in the social structures of the communities that practice them. In the case of the long-held and widespread tradition of arranged marriages in the Balkans, the practice is gradually being transformed in relation to its gender norms, beliefs and roles, becoming more flexible and open to diversity (Chávez, 2022).

The tradition of arranged marriages also raises critical concerns about its human rights dimensions, as it appears to discriminate in many cases against subordinate gender groups, such as female adolescents, young girls and in some cases children. Arranged marriages lie often in a grey area between free will and enforcement (cf. forced marriages). The gendered aspects of the ICH practice can thus be regarded problematic, in gauging the degree of harm in individuals and in such a case, what are the measures to be taken and by who? (Blake, 2014; 2016). The identification of such issues would benefit from an in-depth gender-based analysis of the related ICH practice. It is important to stress that ICH is not "preserved" (keeping things static without any changes) but rather "safeguarded", which ensures viability that is adapting to change.

Keeping in mind the micro level of research, in heritage studies, marriage performed under (direct or indirect) coercion, duress, pressure, and the exercise of violence could be categorized as dark heritage. The term “dark” is quite unclear just like the term “heritage” is left without a universal definition (Thomas, 2022). In short, “dark”, “dissonant”, “contested”, “ambivalent” or “negative” heritage research:

“[E]xplores the concept of cultural heritage as a potentially “dark” force. In other words, dark heritage researchers are interested in how and why people choose to engage with aspects of cultural heritage that are related to times of conflict, death, and suffering. These aspects may have different meanings for different groups or communities depending, for instance, upon their role in the conflict, temporal distance from the events, and hierarchies of power.” (Thomas et al. 2020, p. 425)

As such, it is related to trauma and traumatic experience, bears cultural importance and is connected to the identity of imagined groups and collectives (Connerton, 1989). Therefore, beyond the individual level of traumatic experience that might refer to the clinical category of trauma, in the micro level (like the family or the community) arranged marriage also constitutes social trauma namely, *“an event or series of events remembered as so dangerous as to be impossible to preserve an equilibrating belief in a world that presumes our presence”* (Prager, 2011, p. 429).

Beyond essentializing and binary categories, in the context of the social and psychological trauma, arranged marriage can be traumatic for people directly forced or coerced (isolation, shame, and loss of control over their lives) and people persuaded put into or indirectly coerced or pressured to conform (resentment, anxiety, and depression). Within this framework, arranged marriage in the Balkans can be viewed as dark heritage practice reflecting traumatic memories.

Numerous artworks have emerged from the influence of traumatic memory. This fact is sometimes obvious in the artwork, or it is subtle, mixed with imaginary elements, and expressed through an affective dynamic within the artwork (Bennett 2005). Art is sometimes used as a therapeutic tool at the individual level (Baker 2006, Edwards 2016, Kalmanowitz & Ho 2016). In other cases, it is a way of expressing collective trauma or individual pain expressed as collective tragedy and heritage (Dinitto 2014). Several artworks that address the subject of arranged marriage have been created. Only a few, sporadic examples in different art forms are William Hogarth’s “Marriage A-la-Mode” (1743-1745) paintings that criticize the results of marriage conducted for money or social status, Nilima Sheikh’s paintings that narrate the story of a young woman named Champa who is murdered for her dowry by her husband's family, and Pantelis Voulgari’s film “Anna's Engagement” (1972) that comments on power and subordination relations in the capital of Greece during the 1970s.

3. The ECHO III: For Memory's Sake Project Structure

The ECHO III: For Memory's Sake project is implemented from July 2022 to June 2024. Being an international project in the field of heritage and arts, ECHO III aims to bring together artists from the fields of theater, music, visual arts, and literature in order to explore tradition and culture through the themes of marriage, arranged marriages and nuclear families in the Balkan context and in specific, to explore gender roles and norms through history and how they affect young people and artists living in Europe (About–ECHO Projects, n.d.). The project is implemented by a consortium of non-profit organizations (Inter Alia and Biennale of the Western Balkans from Greece, Open Space Foundation from Bulgaria, Asociația Rhea from Romania, and Projekte Vullnetare Nderkombetare from Albania) and co-financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Commission. In the context of the Creative Europe Programme co-funding, ECHO III aims to tighten and promote the link between artistic creation and local heritage, to empower contemporary artistic creation of the Balkan space by enhancing artists' capacity to be active at the international level, and to increase audience engagement and development and cultural participation.

In order to approach the subject of arranged marriage in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, ECHO III conducted a program of activities including research, analysis, artistic creation and presentation of the artworks to the audience. First of all, research groups in Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania carried out field research in communities conducting interviews with people that have experienced arranged marriage. The interviewers gathered testimonies and additional material (photographs, letters, marriage contracts, and dowry agreements) and archived them in order to create a digital, open access archive. The testimonies and material was also the starting point of inspiration for the creative activities of the project (art residencies). In addition, in Romania audiovisual research about representation of marriages in Romanian and Balkan cinema was conducted. A visual analysis of selected films resulted in six video-essays on the topics of: i. Marriages in Romanian and Balkan Films (2 episodes); ii. a Parallel between the Approach Taken by Spectacle Films vs Films with Authentic Detail - focus on Emir Kusturica; iii. a Case Study on Roma Marriages; and iv. Social Control in Romantic Love vs Arranged Marriages (2 episodes). The produced video-essays served as the base for inspiration for the artists, which watched and discussed together with the researchers during the Romanian video-poetry artistic residency.

The creative part included four art residencies in the four countries, approaching arranged marriage through different artistic means: a theater residency in Athens, Greece, a visual arts (video art) residency in Bucharest, Romania, a music residency in Sofia, Bulgaria, and a literature residency in Tirana, Albania. In Athens, the creative team created a devised theater play and performed eight shows. In Bucharest the artists created video poems that

were presented in a public event. In Bulgaria the musicians created original music, fusing traditional Balkan music and jazz, and presented it in four concerts. The literary writers in Tirana wrote poetry and presented it in two poetry nights. Each residency was organized by the respective non-profit organization in each country. Consequently, at the end of September 2023, a 10-day Wandering Arts Caravan created and managed by the Biennale of the Western Balkans, started from Bucharest with intermediate stops in Vidin, Sofia, Ioannina, Tirana and Elbasan. The Caravan included all artists that took part in the four art residencies that performed in public at the different cities/stops. Under this work plan, ECHO III delivered several deliverables that will be offered to the public in open access. In specific, the script of the theatre play created in Athens and the theatre play per se, a documentary film from the research and a music album from the music residency in Bulgaria, 6 video poems from the visual arts residency in Bucharest, a poetry collection from the literature residency in Tirana, and a platform-digital repository of open access data, results, and artworks of the project.

Each art residency aimed at discussing and challenging gender norms of the past and discovering whether gender roles have changed through time, with a focus on how this topic is perceived and what is its impact on young people and artists in Europe. All the different artistic means used and artworks created in each art residency focused on exploring and re-approaching traditional customs and historical behaviours towards women that stigmatised people's lives and have progressively shaped behaviours of younger generations. ECHO III, by focusing on the topic of arranged marriages, managed to touch an element of intangible heritage that gives meaning to today's everyday lives of individuals and communities and defines a sense of identity. As a living heritage being constantly evolved, ECHO III and its produced artworks stimulated a critical comprehension of past behaviours and gender norms by engaging young artists and inviting different intergenerational audiences to reflect and re-imagine their identity, the power dynamics and their relationships between members family, community and society.

4. ECHO III Research in the Balkans

The ECHO III research groups conducted a total of 44 interviews with people that have experienced or have been involved in arranged marriage (6 in Albania, 20 in Bulgaria, and 18 in Greece). All interviews were open-ended focusing on the personal experience of people on the practice of arranged marriage. From the interviews in each country, different arranged marriage patterns as well as common elements emerged.

The main characteristics of arranged marriage in Albania, as revealed through the interviews, are the school age of the brides, the age difference of more than 10 years between spouses, and the emphasis given by the women interviewees to the element of luck in the spouse selected for them.

Through the interviews, the practice of girls quitting school in order to get married through arrangement by their family emerged. A 78-year-old woman reported that she met her husband at school. *"I did primary and then secondary with him until my father said, 'I cannot continue sending my daughter to school because I don't have money'."* (Anonymous Interviewee #1, 2022). A 63-year-old woman narrates: *"I didn't want him at all because they gave him to me. It was arranged. I was still at school. [...]. I didn't argue my father's decision even though I was still in my senior year of high school."* (Anonymous Interviewee #3, 2022). Another interviewee, a 70-year-old woman recounts her father's attempted to arrange her marriage:

"I was born in a village, my father [...] was of the thought that girls mustn't go to school. I remember I was 13 years old when I finished primary school, I had good grades but many matchmakers were coming at my father and asking for me and my father instead of accepting the school accepted the matchmaker. I was 13 years old and I wanted to go to school, my father: No, you will not go! Lads went to school I did not. He brought someone at home for me, unknown...engaged me...no one asked me whether I wanted or I did not, they married me and after 3 months I ran away. The impact of it? I ran away and never went back to my village instead I went to Memaliaj where I worked in the mine." (Anonymous Interviewee #4, 2022)

Regarding the age difference, on many occasions, the bride was a decade younger than the groom. A 65-year-old woman recollects her first meeting with her future husband: *"Many individuals may not have it, but I had this, the age difference of 13 years. And when we met for the first time together, he didn't make me feel the age difference."* (Anonymous Interviewee #5, 2022) *"I never imagined him, let alone he was 11 years older than me. They arranged it before me seeing him, without taking my opinion."*, reports the 63-year-old woman (Anonymous Interviewee #3, 2022). *"He was more mature than I used to be, he was 10 years older but his family loved me and supported me."*, remembers the 70-year-old woman from Memaliaj (Anonymous Interviewee #4, 2022).

Albanian women married through arranged marriage, underline the fact that they were coerced by their fathers or their close family and the feeling of awkwardness of pairing with a stranger. Speaking of a definite past, they highlight the element of luck and randomness in their marriage. *"I was lucky, my husband turned out to be really nice. Really nice! I think it was good and it wasn't at the same time."*, says another 63-year-old woman (Anonymous Interviewee #2, 2022). *"I didn't argue my father's decision [...]. Anyways, it turned out fine."*, reports the 63-year-old woman that was married a man 11 years older than herself (Anonymous Interviewee #3, 2022). *"[H]e is a good person. First time we met, we went to a bar for coffee but he never lied to me."*, says the 70-year-old woman from Memaliaj (Anonymous Interviewee #4, 2022).

In Bulgaria, the interviews were conducted with people from Roma communities. The Bulgarian research resulted in a book by Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova (2023) that presents an overview of the Roma communities in Bulgaria, their family traditions and their social practices. In Bulgarian Roma, arranged marriages happen in the more closed Roma clans/communities of the Kaldarashi and the Kalaidzhi. A usual feature of Roma communities in Bulgaria is the early age of betrothal and marriage of women. A common belief among some groups is that at the age of 13 or 14 a girl is already an “old maid” and her family is in a hurry to arrange an engagement and marriage (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023). Another prominent element is the importance and attribution of dowry. Dowry is just one aspect of the perception of marriage as a financial transaction. Furthermore, clan/community is also a component that defines marriage and arranged marriage practices in Bulgarian Roma communities. Lastly, the concept of virginity is determinant of the marriage “options” of women.

In general, despite the fact that early marriages are decreasing in number, the percentage of children who marry at the age of 14 remains high (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023). The narration of a Roma woman from Starozagorsko, explaining how she was asked to marry her daughter, is an example of marriage arrangement at a young age and how early age marriage forms families:

“They came to ask for my little daughter (12 years old), I didn’t give her and she ran away. Then they brought me a gift - the sheet from the first intercourse. They lived together for a while and separated; their three children went abroad. She married another man, 20 years older than her. My other daughter has 9 children - 8 boys and 1 girl. She is 30 years old now. She already has a grandchild.” (Anonymous Interviewee #5, 2022)

Likewise, Asya from the Trigrad village narrates the story of her mother who was married twice with arranged marriage with two brothers. The second groom was 16 years old:

“She was from the village of Mugla. She got married in Trigrad, but her husband soon died. Her brothers came to take her back home to Mugla. Her husband’s parents did not allow that and married her off to her husband’s 16-year-old brother.” (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023)

For Roma people in Bulgaria, dowry is tangled up with marriage. The wedding is so important in the life of the Roma that as soon as a girl is born, the mother begins to prepare her dowry. From their side, boys’ parents are responsible for providing a house for the future husband and his wife. The parents of the future spouses agree on the wedding terms beforehand; when they would get married, where they would live, what would the dowry

amount to. Dowry varies depending on the financial status of the families. In all cases however, arranged marriage accompanied with dowry and other financial benefits is considered a means of security for the bride to be; “We give this girl to that family - they will look after her there, they have money. She will thrive there.” (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023, p. 98)

However, when it comes to the part of economic transaction in arranged marriage, dowry is not the only economic arrangement involved in the practice. Like in many other cultures, offering and spending is connected to celebration and gifts that will accompany the couple.

“When we decide to get married, she is going to ask for a lot of things - 4-5 prom dresses, live music, a camera, etc. And you need money for this – without money, nothing happens. We invite relatives, friends - whoever loves us comes to the wedding.” says a young Roma boy from the Stara Zagora region. (Anonymous Interviewee #6, 2022)

Beyond celebrations, a traditional Roma wedding also involves a lot of gifts for the bride and groom. One should also note that in the past, engagement was a mandatory test for future spouses. During the period of engagement, the young people had the opportunity to get to know each other better and feel confident to step in their marriage. There was also an engagement celebration that was almost as big as the actual wedding, where the parents had to agree on who would cover the expenses (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023).

Moreover, the Kaldarashi and Kalaidzhi Roma clans/communities follow endogamy rules in marriage and do not let “outsiders” marry with members of their own clan. This is a way in which they try to preserve their tradition. In that sense, they arrange marriages in order to prevent mixed marriage. *“We only want to be among ‘our people’, our minority group. In this way, we preserve ourselves and continue the tradition from generation to generation”*, says a Kalaydzhi man from the Stara Zagora region (Anonymous Interviewee #7, 2022). Endogamy is very important for these communities in order to preserve their traditions, their “purity”. Asya recalls her mother repeating her advice for choosing a husband; *“He can be disabled, but please don’t get married to a man in another village!”* (Asya, 2022).

These particular communities of the Thracian valley, preserve the custom of the “bride market” or “buying a bride”. In the bride market of Stara Zagora, on the first Saturday of Orthodox Christian Lent, young and teenage girls are sold to potential husbands. All the people of the Kalaydzhi community join together and celebrate on this day. This is the only day when girls are allowed to meet men. The men should belong to their community since marriage outside the community is prohibited. The market is a very old tradition for the Kalaydzhis where they deal with complex negotiations on the bride price and settle it for their marriage (Chakraborty, 2022).

“I have three boys, one is married. I take the other two to the market to meet their relatives and friends. At some point, we will choose a girl from a family from the same clan - this is how we have preserved the tradition for so many years, so that we do not die out and survive as a community”, describes a Kalaydzhi man from Stara Zagora (Anonymous Interviewee #8, 2022).

Despite the phrasing of “bride buying” and “bride market” the custom does not imply literal buying of people but rather a ritual followed for generations. The transactional part of the bride market arrangement has two meanings: (a) buying the “honour” of the bride, the right of the boy to take her virginity and the right of the boy’s family to continue their lineage and (b) the “bride ransom”, the payment given to the girl’s family is a compensation for her loss when she leaves the family home to get married. In communities and groups with a patriarchal social organisation the woman belongs to her father’s clan, and thus compensation must be paid to the clan (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023). Payment also determines the social status of the children to be born, as the payment guarantees the security of the paternal line. For example, after a divorce among the Kaldarashi community, the child is usually left with the father’s relatives. Nowadays, in the Sofia region, on many occasions, “buying” is done when young people are attracted and already know each other. The money that is given as a dowry from the young man’s side, is used as initial capital for the young family to start their life together (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023).

The concept of virginity is very important in the Bulgarian Roma marriages. It is determinant for the future brides in terms of age of arrangement and marriage, marriage options, dowry and economic benefits for her family.

“We protect our children. We warn them not to have sex, because chances are they won’t marry after that and the whole thing will turn ugly. Just don’t do that, still you can respect each other, but don’t have sex. If it happens, in some cases the two are forced to marry, but other times the marriage does not take place because the boy denies that he slept with the girl”, says a Roma woman from Stara Zagora (Anonymous Interviewee #9, 2022).

Virginity is connected to honour and determines the value of the bride literally and metaphorically. In case a girl is not a virgin, her chance of starting a family is often with a divorcee or a widower of older age (Kutzeva & Tzankova, 2023). Another Roma woman from Stara Zagora narrates her personal experience:

“My mom and dad wouldn’t let me be with the boy I first fell in love with and lost my virginity to. He stole me and took me to Kazanlak, but my parents

brought me back home. I never saw this boy again. Then I met another one, who had been married before.” (Anonymous Interviewee #11, 2022)

“When I got married, there was no blood, but I was a virgin. My mother-in-law took me to the doctor to prove that it was my first sexual intercourse. I was very worried then, I cried. I was very scared. My husband trusted me, but his family had doubts”, recalls a Roma woman from Filipovtsi, Sofia (Anonymous Interviewee #10, 2022).

Going back to the “bride market” practice, the virginity of the young girls is a very important factor amongst the Kalaidzhis community for selling the girls, as they would be sold at a much higher price. If the girl is not a virgin, then their families would get a lower price for their daughters. The ethnographer Velcro Krustev cites *“The man is buying her virginity, not buying the wife”* (Chakraborty, 2022).

In Greece, arranged marriage components appearing through the interviews are the economic/bargaining dimension, the presence of a marriage mediator, and the age of the bride and age difference.

Dowry is very common in the case of Greek arranged marriage. Like the Bulgarian Roma the woman is valued based on her virginity and age. However, unlike the Bulgarian Roma, the value of the bride does not determine the profit to be obtained by the family of the future bride but rather the dowry offered to the groom and his family (also known as bride-dowry). The absence of virginity could be a reason for the groom’s family to cancel an arranged marriage or to ask for more bride-dowry. A woman from the central Peloponnese narrates a story where the groom and his parents asked for more bride-dowry on such an occasion:

“There was one [groom] that came here and she [the bride] was not ok [virgin] and while they were celebrating, they took her back [to her parents]. [...] Yes, they took her back in order to get more dowry.” (Anonymous Interviewee #11, 2022)

An anonymised woman describes the usual practice in the traditional marriage through her own experience:

“From then on, they stripped me, they groped me, [to check] I have nothing on me [with which I could] I cut myself and say that I am a virgin and they put my shirt on and then I went with my husband. And they were waiting outside and as soon as mine and my husband's will was done, after a while my cousin came back inside, took my shirt with the blood on it and took it out and showed it to my parents in law and they put it on the yucca for everyone to

see. As soon as that was done they were shooting gunshots because I was fine, a virgin. Then they played the violins and danced right until the next day at night.” (Anonymous Interviewee #12, 2022)

Another woman from the central Peloponnese narrates a similar story:

“In the old days, if the bride was good [virgin], on Monday morning the father of the bride went back to receive congratulations from the groom’s relatives. Congratulations, the bride was fine, they were telling him. [...] However, if the bride was not good, bad luck would befall her. Then, they [the groom’s relatives] went to ask her father for additional dowry. They were asking for more money and more land and vineyards and whatever else they wanted. The poor father of the bride bowed his head and ashamed of his girl, he would give them additional dowry without objections.” (Anonymous Interviewee #13, 2022)

A third narration by an anonymous woman describes how the groom returned the “damaged” bride to her parents and then received her back:

“And my grandmother says at night, after the marriage has gone to hell, Yianni, she tells him, you will bring us Veneta back. He tells her, shut up. She tells him, do you listen to what I am saying? In the morning I will put Veneta on the donkey. I will get her to ride on a black donkey she tells him, and she was taken back again, he just took the field and she was all right [virgin] after that.” (Anonymous Interviewee #14, 2022)

Arranged marriage was usually mediated by a local person, a matchmaker that would bring together the families to negotiate and decide on the marriage and dowry. An old man from the central Peloponnese recalls the story of a family that addressed the matchmaker to arrange a marriage for their son:

“We [the parents] want to ask a bride to a wedding and we don't know how to do it. Well, he [the matchmaker] says you're going to tell so-and-so to that woman that we want to get together, to get their girl. The matchmaker went. They were putting a person in. A person, a relative, a friend.”

A matchmaker from the central Peloponnese speaks about her experience:

“I was getting involved [in matchmaking] too, and had managed to make eight [arranged marriages]. After all, if the arranged marriage was proposed, each parent would discuss it with his family. Then they would tell the matchmaker if

they accepted and arranged where to meet to discuss the dowry. Then they arranged what dowry the family would give to their daughter.” (Anonymous Interviewee #15, 2022)

Like in Albania and Bulgaria, a young bride would be more appreciated than an older one. A 59 year old woman remembers: *“In my mother’s time, let’s say, they were hiding it [the age]. Yes, especially if a girl was growing up, they were hiding it yes.” (Anonymous Interviewee #16, 2022)*

A woman from Arkadia region narrates a story, where the family tricked the bride into arranged marriage with a 65 year old widower by presenting her a younger groom in his place:

“She was, she still is, Angelo, and we had an old man here, a 65-year-old widower, he had no children. And what do you think he does? He takes another one, here from the village, a 40-year-old man, and they take him over there for the bride to see. She saw him and liked him. On Sunday she says we will come for the [wedding] wreaths, right away. They go on Sunday, bring the old man, take him there and present him to Angelo. [...] She was stupid. She had no money in her poverty. She was 40 years old, that’s why she took the widower, she wouldn’t have taken him otherwise.” (Anonymous Interviewee #17, 2022)

In Romania, audiovisual research and analysis of selected films opened a discussion between artists and cultural professionals, about film language and how weddings and the woman’s role in them is portrayed in the Romanian and Balkan cinema. Twelve films have been selected and analysed, taking into consideration a correlation between historical and social movements in relation to the representation of ritual in Romanian and Eastern European cinema. Several scholars have argued that visuals play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, they can have a *“positioning power on the viewer’s imagination”* (Joffe, 2008) while specific fixed attitudes that are reflected in the big screen can function as a state’s soft power tool (Belkin, 2000).

Six video essays¹ have been produced, discussing social stigma regarding marital practices, showing the connection to ecclesiastical practices, but also trying to comprehend the modernisation of society from the 19th century up to the present. By understanding the generational and ancestral lines dictating modern perspectives upon wedding and ritual, one could afterwards discuss the process of unlearning. The video essays produced out of this research offered possibilities of expression to the respective artists in residence when working on their video poems. In this way, the video poems reinforce the argument that the role of cinema should not be indisputably linked with the commercial image produced by the big film industry which tends to carry out specific and fixed stereotypical representations of identity and norms.

In order for the video essays to be created, firstly the social and historical framework of arranged marriages in Romania was studied. Consequently, this framework was taken into consideration when analyzing the films, tracing markers of gender norms and how these markers are associated with the reflection of women inside the films. When studying the social and historical framework, the researchers focused on different classifications of marriage as well as different types of arranged marriages. In addition, background of the families, religious norms, wealth of the bride and existing traditions of certain communities (such as Roma) were taken into account within a large historical course, from the ancient times till the 20th century, while emphasis was placed in the Dacian marriages.

Specifically, 4 key themes were central in the analysis of the selected films:

- Interconnectedness between the three life stages: birth, marriage, death
- Religion as a method to dictate social norms
- Arranged marriages through endogamy (social casts and ethnicity) and
- Economic purposes, namely the wife's dowry

Historical demography, represented by various connections with other forms of methodologies related to the study of society, such as anthropological researches or the history of mentalities, show links to three key moments from the life of an individual: birth, marriage and death, and the constant interconnections between these stages (Mircea, 2008).

¹ A video essay can be understood as the audiovisual presentation of a lengthy traditional article. It follows the same structure as a traditional essay, thus introduction, main body and conclusion. Usually video essays have a duration from 5 to 10 minutes. It is a powerful means to communicate complex ideas and reach larger audiences through various communication channels, including social media. The advantage of a video essay is that not only can you argue about a topic through a creative way but also it can use both the language and the structure of a film in order to strengthen an argument. As put by Süleyman Kivanç Türkgeldi, an Assistant Professor in Communication and Performance and Visual Arts, video essays are performative research: "*These forms of expression belong to a plane that cannot be expressed with numerical data but transmitted through symbolic data (moving / still image, sound, and music forms, etc.) outside the boundaries of language*" (Türkgeldi, 2021, p. 821).

The family has always been the focus of attention of ecclesiastical legislators. Sorina Paula Bolovan considered it important to focus upon the importance of family, based on religious texts, so that the behaviour of the (19th century) individual and the collective behavior of the community could be better understood (Bolovan, 1999). The relationship between secular and ecclesiastical laws and the family and marriage is extremely complicated. The Church has, at least up to a certain extent, been able to force its own views and legal regulations on the state with relation to family law in an effort to preserve control.

The video essay *“Social Control in Romantic Love. Arranged Marriages vs True Love in Balkan Cinema”*, by Letitia Popa (2023), consists of 2 parts. Part one is 6:18 minutes-long and part 2 has a duration of 7:44 minutes. It is based on the visual analysis of the films *“A tale from the past”*, Albania, 1985 by Dimitar Anagnosti, and of the *“ Stone Wedding”*, Romania 1972 by Dan Pita.

Shortly presenting its content, part 1 presents the social context of the 19th century in rural Albania and focuses on two families in the village where the parents want to arrange the marriage of their children. Gjino is a boy of 14 years old that his mom wants to marry him in order for her to get rest and be freed from working the land. Marigo is a woman of 20 years old, in true love with a man whose parents arranged the marriage with Gino for economic reasons. Despite Marigo’s denials, she ends up in marriage with Gino, yet we see her afterwards to defy the social norms of the village as well as the indications by her mother-in-law. Part 2 focuses particularly on one scene of the film where the bride sits in the bridal table during her wedding celebration and the whole time is staring at the musician, even leaving the bridal table at a moment and moving towards one of the musicians discussing with him. The next shot of the scene shows the musician wearing her bridal veil and singing a song about social things that the woman is not allowed to do because “her husband said so”. The video ends with the bride and the musician fleeing the wedding.

This is a video essay which pinpoints that in Romanian folklore weddings, *“under the celebrations on the surface, there are multiple layers of discomfort, gender inequality and controversial social dynamics”* (Iordanova, 1998). This is more obvious in the *“Wedding Stone”* film which consists of two independent stories that take place in a Carpathian village. In the first story, a widow is trying to raise money to save her dying daughter. In the second, two wandering singers kidnap a bride from her wedding. Yet Popa, presents only the second story, aiming to give a strong image about the society at large when discussing gender roles within a culture (Stone Wedding, n.d.).

“Social Control in Romantic Love. Arranged Marriages vs True Love in Balkan Cinema” depicts the social norms of the 19th century related to the women’s position and correlates the practice of arranged marriages with economic purposes or/and the physical fatigue of the mother of the family. This video essay proposes an inclusive vision of the links between

social control and “true” love in arranged marriages by relating the position of the woman in regards to the society she is coming from, and thus highlighting seen and unseen political and social constraints in regards to the positioning of the woman.

The video essay *“It takes a Village to Raise a Wedding Toast or Film Brides of Kusturica”*, by Irina Troncan (2023), is 9:17 minutes long looking at weddings (and their central figure of the bride) in Kusturica films with a mix of admiration and skepticism, since their idealization of the young, beautiful woman as wife and future mother is not free from reactionary undertones. The films used for this video essay are *When Father was Away on Business* (1985), *the Time of the Gypsies* (1988), *Underground* (1995) and *On the Milky Road* (2016). According to Troncan, in an era where the Ukrainian war proved that Eastern Europe is a region at high risk of cataclysmic violence, which might also transfer into a correspondingly exuberant affirmation of life and pleasure, Emir Kusturica's films are a particularly spectacular depiction of lust for life, and ceremonial happiness is a big part of it.

Many scholars have discussed Kusturica’s films from a perspective of analyzing national identities within a Yugoslav historical context (eJumpCut, 2009; International Cinema Review, 2013), arguing that Kusturica’s films is a *“re-articulation of national memory and a reflection of intertwined national, historical and popular culture discourses”* (Dakovic, 2003). As Iordanova explains *“wedding scenes are milestones in the films of Kusturica”* (Iordanova, 1998). in every Balkan wedding always a drama unravels; *“along with wedding gifts, the guests bring to Kusturica’s weddings all their suppressed tensions, and once there, they set them free—betrayal, revenge, desire, corruption, contamination, suicide—and let them run wild”* (Iordanova, 1998). The wedding scenes of Kusturica are understood as a symbolism to the perplexity of the Balkan affairs. Yet, it is very interesting how Troncan decided to highlight the role of women in Kusturica’s film in order to discuss gender norms, associate it with the patriarchal views of our society that ECHO III aspired to tackle through its creative process and highlight the interconnectedness between the three life stages: birth, marriage, death. According to Troncan’s video essay *“the wedding dress becomes a life-long disguise”* (Troncan, 2023, 06:41).

Besides the brides of Kusturica, it is interesting to examine how weddings and rituals are represented throughout history in the Romanian cinema. Popa in her video essay *“The Journey of a Bride: The Representation of the Wedding in Romanian Cinema”* proposes a ludic montage by choosing films that depict different time frames throughout history, starting from the 1966 *Zodia Fecioarei/ Virgo*, directed by Manole Marcus, and continuing throughout time with films produced around every 10 years, with the 1973 famous arthouse film *Stone Wedding*, directed by Mircea Veroiu and Dan Pița, followed by the 1982 *Baloane de curcubeu/ Rainbow Bubbles* (1982, directed by Iosif Damian), the 1992 *Balanța/ The Oak*, directed by Lucian Pintilie, jumping afterwards to 2017’s documentary *Nunta anului/ Wedding of the year*. These sequences blend together in a supercut on the journey of the

Romanian bride, creating a portrait that builds up non-linearly through time, space and diverse socio-political frameworks.

Some of the customs represented in the films of this video essay date back to the Roman era. Marriage was also a means for the Dacians to increase their wealth through the dowry of their wives. No formalities were imposed at the conclusion of marriage. The woman was seen as a maid who washed clothes and served the husband, who on the death of the husband was inherited like other property. The medieval Romanian family was thus subject to the authority of the man, without the woman being legally competent as she is later qualified. Marriage was concluded after the betrothal, at which the future husband paid a sum of money (called *arvuna*) as a guarantee of the conclusion of the marriage. The Church had an essential role in the conclusion of marriage, which was also called the holy sacrament, so the marriage was concluded before the priest, no other formalities being necessary. The 17th century, the institution of marriage received the character of a contract. However, it was considered to be traditional among Romanians. In the 20th century, films that depict traditional regional wedding rituals follow the Romanian obsession with exuberance of the Onaş wedding tradition. The motif of abandonment is put in relation to the high exuberance of grandiose wedding parties and big villas constructed by the Romanians that left abroad for work.

Overall, the produced video essays focused on specific films and their representation of social norms, particularly concerning gender roles and the practice of arranged marriages, aiming to understand the evolution of societal norms related to marriage and ritual from the 19th century to the present. These video essays offered a critical perspective on the societal dynamics of the past and their relevance today, revealing also the evolution of marriage practices and the changing roles of women. They explored various aspects of social and historical contexts, with a particular focus on the practice of arranged marriages in Romania and its connection to ecclesiastical practices in relation to shaping family law and societal norms. The results of these video essays offered a fertile ground for the creation of the video poems during the Romanian art residency. They served as a medium for artists to express their interpretations of the societal norms and practices explored in the research.

5. Socially Engaged Art: ECHO III Artistic Creation

In the framework of the ECHO III project 31 artworks were created in total. These artworks aimed to make good use of the research and utilize it in creative production. A variety of artworks created a rich variety of heritage revisited in the present through artistic means.

The devised performance titled "For Memory's Sake" was the result of the artistic residency in Athens, Greece which was presented to the Athenian audience for 8 performances at the Bellos Theatre (from the 6th to the 16th of February 2023). "For Memory's Sake" dealt with arranged marriage, marriage and the nuclear family in the Balkans. On stage there were

Greek and foreign actors from Bulgaria, Romania and Albania, where they co-created and presented a collective multicultural experience based on testimonies, in tradition, but also in the artistic perception of young people on love, family and duty. The play was presented in four languages; Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek and Romanian, while there was also Greek and English subtitles, subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing. Besides, an acoustic description for blind people was foreseen for 2 of the 8 performances. The devised/documentary performance conceived/directed by Panagiotis Liaropoulos, a young and emerging Greek director who tried to unfold to the audience testimonies of oppression, love & choices. The play was a resounding success, with a total of 615 people attending the 8 performances. The audience was diverse in age, gender, and background, which made for a truly engaging and dynamic experience while expressing their emotions and impact of the play at the end of the performance.

In "For Memory's Sake" a family appears on stage. The six actors were speaking different languages and were playing different stories of arranged marriages of different women who had experienced it themselves or who had been the matchmakers. For 1 hour and 10 minutes the stories blended in time and genre, while the original music live on the stage helped to create a flow and one common image, that of a Balkan family. Be it Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian, or Albanian was not important. The important element was that the text was based on secondary research of folklore texts, and interviews conducted with people who either had experienced, or had arbitrated arranged marriage. According to the director, *"when the interviews started, it became obvious that the custom of arranged marriages was alive until recently, because he found out that many people, and not only old ones, had married with arranged marriage"* (Inter Alia, 2023).

According to the playwrights' note

"[T]he core of the play is the genuine connection and sharing of people that were faced with a pre-arranged marriage and had that experience. We were blessed to have a primary material in our hands which exceeds in substance even the most complex works of fiction. This is something that inspired us and something we held on to, in order to bring out the subjective narrations of the protagonists of this reality with respect and admiration. These are people from the greek countryside and our Balkan neighbors who came face to face with their past, pondered upon love and companionship and generously gifted us their memories. This is how this collective story was born - as an attempt to dramatize the collective memory of those who had an arranged marriage".
(Inter Alia, 2023)

The way in which the woman came into focus and the practices of the past and traditions of the Balkans unfolded through multiple human testimonies from different countries was fascinating. Although it used different languages they were all woven in a unique way that

created the impression of a common experience for the viewer, lasting in time, that ultimately defines and shapes the roles of the sexes nowadays. Arranged marriage, perhaps in 2023 seems something distant for modern society and the way in which relationships are formed, but tradition is an integral part of the identity of a place, a society and by extension each and every one of us . Tradition and its various aspects are what unites the past with the future, what creates enduring concepts, and redefines our existence today. Tradition, memory and identity in the Balkan neighborhood, were central issues that had been explored through this play.

In Romania, 4 video poems were created by 6 emerging visual artists from Romania, Albania, Bulgaria and Poland. All artists approached the themes from a self-reflexive perspective. Video-poetry responded accurately to the artistic quests, and enabled them to approach a non-fictional, non-linear narrative, characterized by abstraction and free association between images and words.

Elena Chirila and Ana Gurdis (2023) produced the video poem titled "tell me a poem." In this video, they explore the passages of a personal diary, emphasizing the transformation from childhood to adulthood. The video takes the viewer on a path marked by uncertainty, vulnerability, and self-doubt, eventually culminating in a sense of liberation. "Tell Me a poem" seamlessly transitions between poetic and documentary elements, underscoring a woman's endeavor to overcome repression and discover her inner voice and resilience.

This video poem stirred deep emotions among its viewers. This piece held particular significance as it drew inspiration from the personal experience of one of its creators, who had endured an arranged marriage. The video-poem served as a testimony to the real-life ordeal of a young woman from the Republic of Moldova, who had been compelled to marry her abuser. The audience displayed great curiosity about the artistic journey of this young artist, posing questions such as, "Why did you incorporate images of mountains and water? What significance did they hold for you?" The artists' response was intimately tied to her own process of healing. The artist also shared the rationale behind her use of video diaries within the video-poems, which added depth to the audience's understanding of the work they had just witnessed. The entire experience was cathartic for the young artist, who, with the support of facilitators and colleagues, delved into her own narrative during her residency. During the screening and the subsequent Q&A session, the audience's warm reception took her by surprise. The atmosphere in the venue was imbued with empathy, and attendees commended the young woman's bravery and admired her for sharing her personal story.

Katarzyna Wojtczak (2023) created the "Sister of no value". This film is "a manifestation of reclaiming history and the places of oppression. The story is focused on the six Caryatids that supported the roof of the south porch of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis hill in Athens, Greece. A caryatid, a sculpted female figure, serves as an architectural support in a place of a

column and literally carries a burden on her head. Caryatids became a symbol of the supporting structure of society. In the Athenian Museum of Acropolis where the original five sculptures are being exhibited, there is remaining an empty spot for the sixth one, which was abducted in the XIX century by a British lord and remains till this day in the British Museum, despite Greek requests of return. The “lost sister”, as Greeks call her, was taken in times of war and chaos”.

This artistic audiovisual poem, presented in the form of a film, highlights the crucial process of decolonization as an essential stride towards ending the practice of objectifying the "Other" and reestablishing equality without reliance on imperialism, elitism, or coercion.

“Anemone” has been created by Gergana Ivanova and Ioana Turcan (2023). The narrative centers around a woman caught in the confines of her marriage to a man, struggling with the limitations imposed by her traditional gender role. In her quest for liberation, she embarks on a transformative journey by consuming a potion, leading to a rebirth wherein she feels akin to a genderless and role-free flower. Throughout this odyssey, she stumbles upon the language of Polari, which takes on profound significance in her relationship with her partner. To shield their love from the prying eyes of unsupportive family and friends, they maintain their relationship as a closely guarded secret, with Polari serving as their clandestine means of communication, impenetrable to outsiders. As she explores her newfound identity, the woman draws strength from both her connection with her partner and the language that binds them. She gradually learns to embrace her authentic self, casting off the societal expectations and constraints that had previously held her captive.

The discovery of an old archive photo has brought to the forefront an intriguing inquiry into historical marriages, shedding light on the likelihood that many individuals were unable to openly express their true sexuality and preferences during those times. The narrative underscores the profound influence of language and underscores the significance of acceptance and mutual understanding within relationships.

Lastly, Ornela Alia (2023) in her work “Sad sad sad sad sad summer ” delves into various aspects of couple dynamics that play a prominent role in numerous facets of contemporary culture, such as film, advertising, video games, music, and even poetry. This video poem artfully depicts themes of love, communication, and diverse life experiences, all the while employing humor as both a means of expression and a source of contemplation. Alia also articulates her intention to capture the unique atmosphere that the city of Bucharest imparts.

In Albania, 20 poems were written by six authors/poets. Meri Disnicha, Renis Hyka, and Jona Xhepa from Albania, Olya Stoyanova from Bulgaria, Tonia Tzirita Zacharatou from Greece, and

Miruna Vlada from Romania reflected on arranged marriage and created original literature inspired by their stay in Tirana.

The poems addressed subjects of early age marriage, forced marriage, sexual intercourse between people that do not know each other, emotional distance and alienation, widowhood, the bloody bed sheet tradition, gender identity, womanhood, matchmaking.

The poem “Dumbed for life”, Meri Dishnica, touches upon the issue of limited and superficial communication between partners in an arranged marriage:

*“No deep conversations
are included
in the menu of our fixed marriage
I’d better be as dumb as you are,
you better be as dumb as I am.
We better be both dumb
husband and wife, [...]”* (Dishnica, 2023)

Miruna Vlada in “My Little Siege”, analyzes gendered enslavement that occurs through arranged marriage. She speaks of the absence of consensus, the exploitation of woman through marriage for the purpose of procreation, the stigmatization of women as mothers, wives and ex-wives, and the gradual, multilevel, social imprisonment of the wife:

*“Slavery was practiced and perfected
especially
on our wombs.
No one asks for our permission -
whether we want it or not.”* (Vlada, 2023)

Olya Stoyanova in “Age, suitable for love” refers to the early age marriages that occur nonconsensually by the force of patriarchal families:

*“When she was married off at 15 -
she took from home only one thing -
her old doll,
ragged and so ripped, [...]”* (Stoyanova, 2023)

In the same tone, Tonia Tzirita Zacharatou speaks about the concepts of “pureness” and “virginity” as central elements of early age brides’ arranged marriage:

“[...] you are so small

*you fit in the shell of the fruit
I close my hand
and when I open it again
you are gone*

*white
like the dress
that hangs on the door
of your wardrobe
when you are not rolling in the dirt [...]” (Tzirita Zacharatou, 2023)*

Through poetic, literary language, resident artists managed to create a sensorial experience of the dark practice of arranged marriage and its consequences on the female psyche.

In Bulgaria, an Extended Play musical album (EP) was created as a result of the collaboration of six musicians: clarinetist Ilire Avdiu from Albania (born in Kosovo), pianist Stanislav Arabadjiev, drummer Stefan Goranov, and saxophonist Dimitar Liolev from Bulgaria, trumpet player Pantelis Stoikos from Greece, and flutist Cezar Cazanoi from Romania (born in Moldova). The six artists formed the musical group that worked together, got inspired by the subject of arranged marriage in the Balkans and created original, instrumental music pieces.

Indicatively, music pieces titled Dimitrovo Horo (2023), Lyoleva Rachenica (2023), Peace and Love (2023), and Saga of Nothing (2023) attempt a musical approach to the subject of arranged marriage and marriage traditions in the Balkans. The Dimitrovo Horo and Lyoleva Rachenica music pieces are characterised by a festive, lively tempo, fast rhythm, and traditional bright instrumentation (2023). Their acoustic features and the use of brass, wind instruments evoke memories of traditional, Balkan marriage festivities and create a sense of joy, and revelry. Overall, the fast tempo, and major keys create a cheerful mood. On the contrary, Peace and Love and Saga of Nothing are slow tempo, melodic, classic jazz songs (2023). They create a mellow, relaxed atmosphere and a melancholic, sentimental mood. All pieces combine traditional folklore music and contemporary jazz and in this way approach the past (arranged marriage practices) in the present (by current generations). The musicians of the Bulgarian residency performed their songs in different locations in Sofia; at the Partrait Art space, the Schroedinger bar, the Jazz bar, and the Krasno selo Municipal Cultural center. The audience was informed beforehand that the music was inspired by Balkan marriage traditions and arranged marriages. Additional information was provided inside the spaces through Quick Response (QR) codes that linked to ECHO III project information (philosophy, aim, objectives, activities). After the end of the shows, there were informal discussions between the artists and the audience on how music evoked memories and sentiments of past experience on marriage celebrations.

6. Conclusions

The present paper discussed various aspects related to arranged marriage, focusing on the Balkan region (specifically in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania) through research and artistic creation conducted in the framework of the ECHO III: For Memory's Sake project. ECHO III approached the issue of arranged marriage in the Balkans and consequently gender norms, cultural traditions and their reflections in the present as micro-level dark heritage practices. The project included research, artistic creation, and artistic exhibition. Firstly, micro-level research was conducted in order to feed artistic creation with inspiring data and information. Secondly, artists in residencies used the research data to create original artworks in the fields of theater, music, visual arts, and literature. Lastly, the artworks were exhibited to Balkan audiences. All these aforementioned activities aimed at a sensory, emotional approach to the dark heritage practice of arranged marriages. Field and audiovisual research showed that in the four countries examined, there exist commonalities and differences in arranged marriage traditions, cultures, and practices. For example, marrying at a young age and quitting school seems to be a common pattern for all countries, while age difference between spouses (older grooms being matched with young brides), dowry and the economic dimension of arranged marriage, and matchmakers have different significance and use between the countries.

The original artworks created during the ECHO III project, as a result of the research, offered artistic interpretations and reflections on the subject of arranged marriage, providing additional perspectives on arranged marriages and their cultural significance in the Balkans. Overall, research and artistic creation point at a shared cultural heritage in the region which, despite individual differences, transcend national and linguistic boundaries.

In total, ECHO III: For Memory's Sake provides a study of gender norms, marriage practices, and the role of women in the Balkan region through research and artistic creation in selected countries. It followed a method of conducting research in order to inform original artistic creation and showcased the power of art in exploring and reimagining cultural traditions, shedding light on the experiences of individuals in arranged marriages, and promoting discussion on equality, tradition, and identity in the Balkans. Lastly, ECHO III suggests that understanding traditions and practices of the past regarding arranged marriage, can help address gender inequality and social constraints of the present.

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List of Interviews

Anonymous Interviewee #1 in discussion with the Albanian ECHO III Interview Team, December 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #2 in discussion with the Albanian ECHO III Interview Team, December 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #3 in discussion with the Albanian ECHO III Interview Team, December 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #4 in discussion with the Albanian ECHO III Interview Team, December 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #5 in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #6 in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #7 in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #8 in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #9 in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #10 in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #11 in discussion with Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #12 in discussion with Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #13 in discussion with Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #14 in discussion with Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #15 in discussion with Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #16 in discussion with the Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Anonymous Interviewee #17 in discussion with Panagiotis Liaropoulos, April 2022.

Asya in discussion with Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova, November 2022.



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