

# DOCUMENTARY AND ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN THE GOLDEN APRICOT FILM FESTIVAL

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*Stony Paths*. Dir. Arnaud Khayadjanian. France 2016, 60 min.

*The Other Side of Home*. Dir. Naré Mkrtychyan. USA/Armenia/Turkey 2016, 40 min

*Journey in Anatolia*. Dir. Bernard Mangiante. France 2016, 60 min.

*Gavur Neighbourhood*. Dir. Yusuf Kenan Beysülen. Turkey 2016, 95 min.

*Geographies*. Dir. Chaghig Arzoumanian. Lebanon 2015, 72 min.

*Children of Vank*. Dir. Nezahat Gündoğan. Turkey 2016, 70 min.

*Who Killed the Armenians?* Dir. Mohamed Hanafy Nasr. Egypt 2015, 73 min.

The famous Golden Apricot film festival in Yerevan has become, among its other aims, a remarkable forum for documentary and artistic films on the Armenian genocide and its cultural legacies. In recent years, the emphasis of the genocide-related documentary films has shifted from historical presentations of the actual events to the cases of lost Armenians and rediscoveries of Armenian identities inside Turkey, in addition to the stories of Western Armenians tracing the whereabouts of their forefathers.

## The centennial output

In the centennial year of 2015, the genocide was a special theme in Golden Apricot, and a big number of old genocide-related films were shown in retrospective replays. As was to be expected, the centennial witnessed also a burst of new documentaries and a few more artistic enterprises. The new films included documentaries on Armenians looking for their roots in Western Armenia, such as Adrineh Gregorian's *Back to Gürün* (Armenia 2015, 64 min) and Eric Nazarian's *Bolis* (2011, 19 min), or Istanbul Armenians returning to their ancestral lands for the summer, as was the case in Armen Khachatryan's touching *Return or we exist 2* (52 min). There were also cases of Turkish Muslims discovering their Armenian roots, like in *Turkey, the Legacy of Silence* (2015, 52 min) by Guillaume Clere and Anna Benjamin from France.

Moreover, the lives of certain Scandinavian female missionaries and their roles in the aftermath of genocide were reflected in two dissimilar films. Aram Shahbazyan's *Map of Salvation* (Armenia 2015, 94 min), a big and expensive international project, was distinguished by its cheerful narrator Svante Lundgren. Aesthetically, however, the result was surpassed by Vrezh Petrosyan's simpler yet more poetical approach to a rather similar theme in *Other Homeland: Diaries of Maria Jacobsen* (Armenia 2014, 50 min). Pet-

rosyan's tranquil narrative manages to express something of the inner development of Jacobsen rather solemnly.

Unfortunately, the list of big films with potentiality for international success was much shorter. In addition to the well-known American enterprise called simply *1915* (USA, 82 min), the most interesting case was Robert Guédiguian's thought-provoking *Don't Tell Me the Boy Was Mad* (France, 134 min). Guédiguian's movie was well-directed, but in cultural and political sense his choice to approach the Armenian Genocide through the phenomenon of Armenian terrorism of 1970's was unfortunately the most difficult imaginable for promoting the Armenian cause, and probably an easy one to misunderstand. But at least for those who are familiar with the entire historical problematic, the film offers valuable insights for the legacy of genocide among the French Armenians.

Moreover, it must be admitted that truly artistic endeavours were also scarce. The most profound moments of 2015 were offered by the film portraying Diaspora Armenians' efforts to carry out West Armenian mystical chants first in Europe and then in west Armenian places: Nathalie Rossetti's and Turi Finocchiaro's *Singing in Exile* (Belgium/Poland/France 2015, 77 min) included some magical moments carried by the traditional Akn chants.

Fortunately, the bloom of genocide films did not end with the centennial year, but a considerable amount of interesting new films were presented also during the Golden Apricot festival of 2016. In fact, the number of new genocide-related documentary films remained approximately the same as the year before. Perchance some projects had slightly missed the centennial deadline, but nevertheless the output of 2016 was significant.

Regrettably, such films often fall into oblivion after the festival even though the production may have demanded considerable efforts, and at times the films display artistic qualities that might have some potentiality to popularise the genocide and its heritage.

In the following, the films related to genocide presented during the latest Golden apricot festival in Yerevan, July 10–17, 2016, are reviewed and discussed in order to pay attention to this remarkable phenomenon and to briefly estimate its qualities. In addition to the particular films and their characteristics, the purpose here is to provide some general outlines of the phenomenon in a wider perspective.

### **Stony paths, with an idea in hand**

Documentaries on Armenians searching for their ancestral whereabouts in present-day Turkey typically suffer of two defects, or perhaps rather, obstacles. Firstly, the experience of being an outsider in Turkey is oftentimes delivered in so thorough manner that the result may not differ much from average tourists' attempts to film random people and places. Secondly, the films often make no serious efforts to reach artistic or philosophical depths but concentrate on documenting the phenomenological experience in Turkey. Sure, this may be effective, especially when showing the unwillingness and insecurity of the Turks to deal with the subject, but tourist perspectives are not enough to make outstanding documentaries, even though the films may be flavoured by a few deeper moments of personal

reflections. In other words, the problem is: how to get hold of insiders' views when coming from outside? And how to make the film surpass what is evident?

With some creativity, however, this outsider's complex may be overcome, and even rather easily, as proven by young French-Armenian director Arnaud Khayadjanian in his *Stony paths*. Firstly, his decision to concentrate to the righteous Muslims who tried to save some Armenians, like the governor of Konya, is probably the best method to engage in confidential and warm discussions without provoking immediate defence mechanisms in encounters with the locals.

Khayadjanian's bravest and most original idea, however, was to take with him a copy of Aimé Morot's (1850–1913) painting *The Good Samaritan* that happens to match with the survival story of his great-grandfather who was saved by a Kurd from the river somewhere around Erzinçan. Discussions on the painting easily open up views to the fate of his Armenian great-grandfather, and the artwork serves as a functional substitute to deal with the painful subject – not to mention its Christian contents – in a somewhat indirect way. Moreover, the silent sequences of the young Frenchman tramping in Anatolian mountains carrying a vast painting also manages to represent something of the surrealism of the genocidal experience and its abnormal legacy.

Having said that, Khayadjanian's imagery also shows how deeply the Turks are conscious of the subject, even though they seem to know nothing about it. When the discussion touches the fate of Armenians, the body-language and shivering hands of the interviewees silently show how the experience of destroying a people in one's own neighbourhood is transmitted, at least for a couple of generations.

Khayadjanian himself keeps on showing a friendly face with a sad



smile, and at the same time maintains certain distance to his interviewees, some of whom openly accuse of Armenians killing the Turks as the cause of their misfortune. Nevertheless, Khayadjanian's soft and constructive approach manages to bring some Muslims to acknowledge that a systematic destruction organised by the government may have been 'possible'. However, the use of the 'G-word' means an end to discussion, even with a young intellectual in Turkey.

Moreover, the film is concluded with a proper elevation. In the story of the grandfather, the turning point between life and death was the river. For Khayadjanian, river functions as a symbol that carries time into oblivion yet remains to show the original setting of the genocide. The film ends up with a spectacular scene with Morot's painting standing silently in the landscape in a place where it as if finally found its original setting.

As a result of his creative, personal and warm approach on the painful subject, Khayadjanian won the Golden Apricot prize for the best Armenian Documentary in 2016. One may hope that *Stony paths* is not his last word on his Armenian heritage, and Armenian culture in general.



### **The Other Side of Home**

Naré Mkrtychyan's *The Other Side of Home* tells the story of a Turkish woman who has discovered her Armenian roots from the mother's side. The woman openly and honestly presents herself as a battle-field and conflict zone for whom the annihilated Armenianness has become a part of identity: "I am the conflict. [...] It is just what I am."

The Armenian grandmother of the woman represents a typical case of 13–14 year old girl who was forced to convert and to marry a Turkish officer. Consequently, the captured grandmother never laughed, was never happy, always dressed in black, and never spoke a word about Armenians or Armenian life, but took the secret with her to the grave instead.

Similar descriptions have been heard on many cases in the interviews of last years. In this case, however, the grandmother is remembered as having shown minor signs of happiness when singing Armenian songs that no-one understood.

In the family tradition, grandmother's story was told as a happy fairy tale of a girl who fell in love with a soldier who saved her life. The main character of Mkrtchyan's film refuses to believe the fairy-tale and examines the case critically.

The film, typically for documentaries on the Armenian genocide, also presents some basic information and historical photographs that are familiar from various books and films. This once again indirectly shows the power



of denialism: the basic facts are as if forced to be presented again and again, which in turn effectively hinders possibilities for artistic or discursive evolution.

The woman visited Armenia for the first time in April 2015. In manner of all Armenians, she had the authentic feeling of homecoming when viewing Mount Ararat. Remarkably, she was also deeply impressed by the presence of uprooted Armenians from all over the world – people who do not belong in the places in which they are located today, but who should rather be somewhere in Anatolian mountains.

In spite of her Armenian part and genuine sympathy, the woman does not want to use the word 'genocide' and speaks of massacres and deportations instead. A victory to the Turkish side in her inner conflict.

### **Journey in Anatolia: post-genocide tourism documented**

Western Armenian cultural heritage tours from Yerevan to Turkey via Georgia have been active for several years, and thousands of Armenians from Armenia and Diaspora have seen Ani, Kars and Van, to say the least. Bernard Mangiante's *Journey in Anatolia* tells the story of one such group consisting of Armenians from France, German and Yerevan, joined by an Armenian from Istanbul. The places visited are the customary ones, and the film is a fine basic documentary, yet without any outstanding special dimensions or artistic ambitions.

The somewhat middle-of-the-road film is, in a way, saved from mediocrity by the character of charismatic French Armenian scholar sharing his own interpretations and backgrounds for the phenomena encountered in a charming manner. (However, I would like to challenge his remark that viewing Ararat as a national symbol is a 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalistic



invention, for the nationalists did not need to start from zero: they just continued and developed the roles Ararat had in medieval Armenian culture.)

*Journey in Anatolia* also manages to document a telling case of the ever-on-going Turkish mania for the hidden Armenian gold. Namely, a Turk completely seriously explains that the cusps of cross in an old *khachkar* are signs of hidden treasure's whereabouts! The phenomenon of treasure hunt reveals that the attitudes of legalised robbery of Armenian wealth are still alive and well in the Eastern Turkey.

### **Gavur Neighbourhood – charming recollections from the past**

The post-genocide Armenian history of Diyarbakir has become better known in recent years, owing to the book published by Hrant Dink Vakfi,<sup>1</sup> in addition to the emergence of interviews in various media. The interest was intensified first by the restoration of Surb Kirakos church by the Armenian community, and then because of its seizure by Turkish authorities for obscure reasons.

Yusuf Kenan Beysülen's *Gavur Neighbourhood* tells the story of Margosyan family, the survivors of whom were forced to migrate from their village, the beloved Heredan in 1915. With the other remains of Armenians, they move to Diyarbakir's Gavur ('infidel') neighbourhood, yet keeping the Heredani traditions alive. 'Heredantsi' was one of the first three words taught to a newborn baby!

The central figure in the film is Mıgırdıç Margosyan, survivors' child, who in his youth lived and worked in Diyarbakir as an apprentice blacksmith until 1953. Later he became known in Turkey as a writer, "Master Margos from Diyarbakir".

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1. Ferda Balancar (ed.), *Sounds of Silence II: Diyarbakir's Armenians Speak* (Istanbul: International Hrant Dink Foundation Publications, 2013). The Turkish original *Diyarbakırlı Ermeniler Konuşuyor* was published in Istanbul 2012.

In his writings Margosyan expressed the inherited yearning for Heredan, which had become like a lost Eden symbolising all precious that has been lost in both outer and inner reality:

Heredan, Heredan, Heredan, the father's hearth, the mother's lap... A whole generation, children and all, were separated from you, torn away, piece by piece, 'berdan, berdan (as the Kurds would say)'. But the never could or would forget you. You become a yearning in their hearts, grief on the smiles, and a kiss on the lips. You become a decoration, an adornment on the tombstones over the graves.<sup>2</sup>



The film *Gavur Neighbourhood* is built around Margosyan's charismatic personality. With his original and warm charm, Margosyan takes the viewer for a walk in the old streets of Diyarbakir and re-awakens Armenian characters that once lived and walked there. Exceptionally, he manages to do the reminiscing without any bitterness or gloominess. For Margosyan, life is like one big fairy-tale the course of which is not in individuals' hands. In a similar manner, Margosyan has in his writings depicted Diyarbakir and its forgotten social and cultural fabric with his colourful poetic language.

Interestingly, the film also documents insights to the Jewish quarter of Diyarbakir, emptied of its original inhabitants in late 1940's. Thus the film shows the fate of multiculturalism in a society on its way of becoming an utterly Islamic nation. Unfortunately, similar stories could be told of so many traditionally multicultural centres of Eastern Mediterranean, such as Antioch or Alexandria.

Finally, one cannot help wondering whether the film could have been improved by editing its ending a bit shorter; now it seems to have several potential endings in row. Having said that, the present solution serves to distance the viewer in phases, step by step: first from Diyarbakir to the school in Istanbul, and finally to the graveyard where Margosyan reminiscences courses of life in his poetic style. Be that as it may, *Gavur Neighbourhood*, due to its warmth and insights, stands out among the documentaries in a charming manner.

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2. Translation from Fatma Müge Göçek: *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 210.

One could suppose that of all these documentaries, *Gavur Neighbourhood* might be the easiest one to sell to the European TV channels, because of its multicultural ethos.

### **Geographies – a sophisticated narrative**

From an artistic point of view, the most aesthetic film of the seven is without doubt Chaghig Arzoumanian's family story entitled *Geographies*. The Lebanese-Armenian director nar-



rates a story that starts from Erzurum half a millennium ago and proceeds to Buruncisla, the village of Arzoumanian's ancestors for hundreds of years. The memory fragments of the village include a blue river, a church and forty donkeys of grandfather's grandfather.

Step by step, the story proceeds to Beirut, Cairo, and as far as Canada. In one of the key scenes, a descendant in America, after Pink Floyd's concert, realizes that he has as if ended up too far from his ancestors; he burns his books of western philosophy and decides to return to Lebanon. The circle is not closed, but at least it started to turn towards the beginning.

The film is distinguished by the quality of its verbal narrative – indeed, one of the most solemn Armenian genocide heritage narratives on the silver screen. The slow flow of imagery and the mental space created by moments of silence results in a film to be breathed rather than watched.

The director does not wail or speculate the lack of information after the annihilation, but proceeds solemnly and resolutely with those facts and contents that do exist, creating a hypnotic poetry of small gestures. In other words, she does not aim to portray the past as it was but rather shows the emptiness, what is no longer there.

The long sequences and silent moments are effects that usually demand exceptional visual imagery. In this respect the film is of rather uneven quality, however. Part of the



imagery stands out for its beauty, yet some other sequences are rather ordinary and even somewhat clichéd (camels of Cairo). Arzoumanian's narrative connected with visual imagery of Theo Angelopoulos would have made a perfect match! However, *Geographies* stands out among the genocide stories, due to its sublime narrative, even though the visual imagery is not always completely mature.

Perhaps the certain softness and sensitivity in the telling could be defined as a kind of feminine mode of narrative, in the sense that the outer actions are less important than their inner contents. In the final climax of the film, the narrator is left with the concepts of blue river, church and forty donkeys; the outer world has no trace of these to offer, but in her inner world they all are real and constantly present.

Regrettably, technique and style of *Geographies* will unavoidably be considered as too boring for big audiences, yet the long sequences and moments of silence serve those who are familiar with the genocide and are in need of some inner space for its reflection.

### **Children of Vank**

Most of the documentaries filmed in Turkey show a good deal of random people who are more or less unwilling to hear or talk about the annihilated presence of Armenians. Nezahat Gündoğan's *Children of Vank* shows a more rare case of the descendants of Armenians who are desperately keen on knowing about their past.



The film documents the exceptional case of Dersim, an area known of its Alevi majority, where some Armenians lived in a small monastery of Surb Karapet of Halvor (not the famous Karapet of Mush) until it was destroyed by the army in 1938. Consequently, the last Armenians were scattered to different directions. Some become Alevis, some Sunnis. Little by little some of them find out about their respected

great-grandfather who was an Armenian priest.

Gündoğan shows the heirs of these Armenians in search of information about their relatives, grandparents and the way of life they had. Each piece of information, even the smallest one, is valuable for them. However, the distorted traditions may include oddities; such has Herodes killing John the Baptist in Kayseri, before a mule brings his relics to the place where the monastery was built!

*Children of Vank* helps to understand the meaning of genocide as annihilation of national and family customs and beliefs, and even of their memory. The descendants struggle with detached Armenian names, some Armenian words such as *achig*, 'girl', and give an

overall impression of helplessness in dealing with the traumatic legacy of genocide and the cultural emptiness left by the disappearance of an ancient way of life.

A special mention must be made on Mikail Aslan's song *Surp Garabed'e Gitmişim*. The hypnotic song is used in the very end of the film to express something of what was left unsaid: the immeasurable depth of Armenian spiritual, aesthetic and cultural life that was lost forever. The song is from Aslan's album *Petag. Dersim Ermeni Halk Şarkıları* (2010), which is one of the best monuments of Western Armenian culture from Turkey of our times.



### **Who Killed the Armenians?**

The only traditional documentary about the genocide itself among these films is *Who Killed the Armenians?* by Maryam Zaki and Mohamed Hanafy Nasr from Egypt. Nasr is the first Muslim Arab to make a full film on the Armenian genocide. It came out just for an important moment in history, when the parliament of Egypt was to discuss about the recognition of the genocide.



*Documentary and Artistic Perspectives on The Armenian Genocide  
in The Golden Apricot Film Festival*

Given the fact that director Nasr is a Muslim, and so is most of his audience, it is no surprise that the role of Islam in the events is not highlighted as much as the cruelty of Ottoman history. However, the film is made with a good deal of effort, including shootings in Armenia, Egypt, and Lebanon, as well as interviews of remarkable characters such as Richard Hovannisian, Haik Demoyan, Taner Akçam, and the two Catholicos Aram I and Karekin II.

In brief, *Who Killed the Armenians?* deserves a full appraisal even by its mere existence. The same conclusion was made also by the leadership of Armenia, for Nasr and Zaki received the Republic of Armenia's Presidential Award for their significant contribution to the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

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After viewing more than a dozen new genocide-related non-fiction films in two years, I would like finally to draw attention to two important factors – not in the actual films produced but to what is lacking. Firstly, the beauty and colorfulness of the pre-genocide Armenian village life and its immeasurably rich traditions are not shown in any film. Such a film would need extremely much background work, not only in gathering the ethnographic information, but all the more in learning to grasp the ethos that was so dissimilar to modern way of life in the West, or even to the one in Post-Soviet Armenia, in which most of pre-1915 religious traditions of Western Armenia are already unknown.

Secondly, where are the art films and creative experiments? Most of the films discussed above are very basic by their technical and narrative solutions and, generally speaking, rather predictable. Could it be that the Turkish denialism has frozen the film makers to the level of the most basic documentary output, leaving everyone cautious of using imagination and creativity in order to avoid accusations of “inventing” things? Here again, the best way to show the true meaning of genocide would be to show the inner and outer character of the way of life, spirituality, culture and arts that disappeared. Just think of the beauty of Armenian medieval folk songs, to name one example, and the possibilities for their visualization. Sergei Parajanov did not say it all.