Folia Humanistica et Socialia
ISSN 3004-1260

3. évf. 1. szám (2025), PPKE BTK
https://doi.org/10.69705/FHS.2025.3.1.5

Images and Perceptions of Armenia in Armenian Diaspora Films

Marianna Manasyan
PPKE BTK Doctoral School of History, PhD student

Képek és percepciók Örményországról az örmény diaszpóra filmjeiben.
Absztrakt: Ez a tanulmány azt vizsgálja, a diaszpórabeli örmény filmkészítők hogyan alakították az Örményországról alkotott képet és percepciókat három fő időszakban: a szovjet korszakban, a posztszovjet átmenet idején, valamint a kortárs időszakban. A diaszpórabeli filmek részletes elemzése révén a kutatás rámutat arra, a szovjet érában – közvetlen örményországi tapasztalatok nélkül kialakított – elképzelt és szimbolikus ábrázolások hogyan alakultak át a függetlenség elnyerését követően reálisabb, heterogénebb és kritikusabb reprezentációkká. A szovjet korszak diaszpórabeli filmjei a traumát, a veszteséget és az elképzelt szülőföldet hangsúlyozták, míg a posztszovjet és kortárs alkotások a kiábrándulás, a gazdasági nehézségek, az elfojtott trauma és a széttöredezett identitás narratíváit helyezték előtérbe. Kiemelt figyelmet kap, hogy az olyan filmesek, mint Atom Egoyan, Gariné Torossian és Michael Hagopian Örményországot nem csupán földrajzi hazaként, hanem az emlékezet, a kultúra és a folyamatos tárgyalás komplex konstrukciójaként ábrázolják. Az elemzés hangsúlyozza, hogy a diaszpórabeli örmény filmek kettős szerepet töltenek be: egyszerre őrzik a szétszóródott nemzeti identitást és tárják fel Örményország ellentmondásait, illetve folyamatosan változó valóságát a globális kulturális kontextusban.

Abstract
This study examines the images and perceptions of Armenia constructed by Armenian diasporic filmmakers across three major periods: the Soviet era, post-Soviet transition, and contemporary times. Through a close analysis of diasporic films, the research highlights how representations shifted from imagined and symbolic portrayals during the Soviet era—formed without direct access to Armenia—to more realistic, heterogeneous, and critical depictions following Armenia's independence. Soviet-period diasporic cinema emphasized themes of trauma, loss, and imagined homeland, while post-Soviet and contemporary films introduced narratives of disillusionment, economic struggle, concealed trauma, and fragmented identity. Special focus is given to how filmmakers like Atom Egoyan, Gariné Torossian, and Michael Hagopian conceptualize Armenia not solely as a geographical homeland but as a complex construct of memory, culture, and ongoing negotiation. The analysis underscores that Armenian diaspora cinema plays a dual role: preserving a dispersed national identity while exposing the contradictions and evolving realities of Armenia within the global cultural context.

1. Introduction

Images and perceptions of Armenia are unavoidably distinct and heterogeneous. There are many reasons for this. However, the most influential aspect is the dispersion of Armenians to various corners of the world. What we now call the Armenian diaspora has taken on a more significant role than it used to have. In fact, the Armenian diaspora opened a new space for images of Armenians and perceptions of Armenia. These have been expressed in different fields and in different ways.

It is important to consider the Soviet Union and Soviet Armenia when categorizing the various images and representations pertaining to Armenia. The Soviet Union

emerged as a result of the October Revolution of 1917. With the Red Army's capture of Yerevan on December 2, 1920, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic was founded (Türk et al., 2022, 155). This was the condition of Eastern Armenia. A referendum held on September 21, 1991, ratified the Republic of Armenia's independence. The Soviet Union's dissolution on December 26, 1991, led to its recognition.

The western part of Armenia was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century. The Ottoman Empire organized the massacres of Western Armenians (in what is now Eastern Turkey) in 1915; about 1.5 million Armenians were killed, and many others found refuge in various parts of the world (Kévorkian, 2011). The formation of the Armenian diaspora was largely a result of the Armenian Catastrophe. Today, the main diaspora communities are in the Middle East, Western Europe, and North America, with additional communities in South America, Australia, and Eastern Europe. This research focuses primarily on the Armenian diaspora in the West.

The analysis concentrates on the filmic representation of Armenia, particularly in cinematographic works. It explores the images and perceptions of Armenia based on films made by Armenian diaspora filmmakers. The necessity of such analysis arises from the fact that little attention has been paid to Armenian diaspora films. This research further contributes to learning about national films and cultures by examining films that depict the national experience from a diasporic perspective. It uncovers that there is no singular, uniform Armenian culture. Armenian culture is a mixture that includes elements originating from Armenians with quite distinct experiences. The experiences of Armenians outside of Armenia make ground for multiculturalism; the images of Armenia are always represented in combination with some other cultural elements.

The distinct character of images in Armenian diaspora films raises necessity for allocating the films according to their periods of release; here, the Soviet and post-Soviet factors are essential. The significance lies in the fact that Soviet perceptions of Armenian diasporic filmmakers are based on imagined and unrealistic assumptions, largely due to the prohibition on these filmmakers traveling to Armenia. Meanwhile, post-Soviet images are real, proficient, and reasonable; they come from singular and direct perceptions, that is, from the filmmaker himself/herself. Thus, this research aims to uncover the distinct images and perceptions of Armenia created by various Armenian diaspora filmmakers during different time periods and through different ways of relating to Armenia. The main sources for analysis are the films themselves.

The research concludes that the emergence of diasporic cinema brought Armenian cinema onto the global platform. Regardless of whether the images were unreal (Soviet period) or realistic (post-Soviet), the thesis marks the uniqueness of each and gives reasonable interpretations of most perceptions. Contemporary diasporic films reaffirm the post-Soviet awkward images that continue to persist and either add new ones or reveal recently problematic aspects.

2. National vs. Diasporic: Debates around the Nature of National and Diasporic Cinemas

The distinction between national and diasporic cinemas is complex and often contradictory. Defining boundaries between these categories proves challenging, much like the broader difficulty of distinguishing between national and diasporic identities themselves. Diasporic cinema can be understood as a synthesis of the national and the foreign, representing a cultural production created outside the territorial homeland. This chapter explores the core components of both national and diasporic cinemas, arguing that each plays a significant role in global culture. Diasporic cinema, through its continuous reference to the homeland, introduces national narratives to a global platform, while the visibility of diasporic cinema often relies on the recognition of national cinema.

Diaspora, by its very nature, is often rooted in trauma, rupture, and forced displacement (Naficy, 2001, 14). The Armenian Catastrophe—the genocide—is the foundational trauma that catalyzed the formation of the Armenian diaspora. Early 20th-century Armenian diasporic artists drew on this traumatic event, while artists in Soviet Armenia were restricted in representing genocide, as Soviet ideology suppressed nationalistic themes. Thus, Armenian representations diverged dramatically between the homeland and the diaspora: while diaspora artists maintained nationalistic memories, those within Soviet Armenia were compelled to adapt to ideological constraints. This divergence highlights an important point: during the Soviet era, diasporic representations were often more openly nationalistic, serving as a crucial means of preserving Armenian identity when it was suppressed within the homeland. Visual representations, particularly in cinema, thus became vital in preserving national memory and identity outside the physical borders of Armenia.

Understanding diasporic cinema requires first engaging with the concept of national cinema. However, "national cinema" itself resists a singular, universally accepted definition (Higson, 1989, 36–37). Often used prescriptively rather than descriptively, the term is more about ideological construction than about reflecting the lived cinematic experiences of audiences (Higson, 1989, 37). Some definitions suggest that national cinema includes works by filmmakers of a given nationality focusing on their heritage, while others allow for films created by foreigners about a nation. Thus, national cinema is less a rigid category than a dynamic, contested field.

Andrew Higson argues that national cinema should be defined by its coherence, unity, distinct identity, and consistent thematic concerns. Additionally, the concept has historically served as a strategy of cultural and economic resistance—a way for smaller nations to assert autonomy against dominant global industries (Higson, 1989, 37). In contrast, diasporic cinema is less restricted, reflecting a hybridized experience that incorporates multiple cultural identities.

The diasporic encounter with foreign cultures is a central dynamic in diasporic filmmaking. Regardless of the host culture's attitude toward newcomers, diasporic films inherently reflect global cultural interactions. Identity remains crucial, but the combination of homeland memories and host-country influences positions diasporic cinema firmly within a global cultural framework. While national cinema tends to reflect a singular, dominant identity shaped by internal cultural and political forces (Conti, 2012, 2), it cannot be purely homogeneous; diasporic elements inevitably diversify the national cinematic landscape. Meanwhile, diasporic cinema constructs diverse identities not through singularity but through the blending of multiple cultural experiences.

Hamid Naficy, in his book entitled *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, describes diasporic films as "accented cinema," emphasizing the personal displacement of filmmakers and their artisanal production methods. He writes: "The accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes" (Naficy, 2001, 4). However, while Naficy focuses heavily on the filmmaker's individual displacement, this chapter argues that the collective representations—the characters, narratives, and visual imagery—are equally, if not more, significant in defining diasporic cinema.

Laura Marks offers a different perspective by describing diasporic cinema as "intercultural cinema." According to Marks, intercultural cinema mediates at least two cultural orientations and cannot be exclusively claimed by one (Marks, 2000, 6). This is particularly relevant to Armenian diasporic cinema, where representations often weave together Armenian cultural elements with those of the host society, creating new, hybridized cultural expressions.

Armenian diasporic cinema is thus remarkably diverse. Filmmakers engage with the idea of "return," both imaginary and physical, as many diasporic artists were unable to access Soviet Armenia. Their cinematic visions of the homeland were mediated through memory, imagination, and second-hand accounts. Nevertheless, the diaspora's creative distance allowed for freer explorations of Armenian identity, blending it with the multicultural realities of their new environments. Atom Egoyan's *Calendar* (1993) is a prime example, contrasting Armenian religious and cultural sites with scenes from Toronto, revealing a layered, multicultural identity.

Higson's "consumption" strategy (Higson, 1989, 36–46) further complements this discussion by emphasizing the global reception and consumption of national and diasporic films. While Naficy concentrates on the filmmaker's personal experience and textual accent, Higson and Marks advocate broader frameworks: Marks focuses on sensory recombination and intercultural mediation, and Higson on global market dynamics. Their broader perspectives situate diasporic cinema as a key component of global cinematic culture.

Marks also introduces the concept of "haptic visuality," where cinema evokes the senses of touch, smell, and taste, recalling memories that words alone cannot capture (Marks, 2000, 110). Yet diasporic memory is inherently hybridized; memories of home are inflected with the foreign experiences of exile, making diasporic films intricate combinations of national and foreign elements. As Marks contends, the sensory encounter of different cultures results in new ways of embodying and relating to the world (Marks, 2000, 23). These multisensory combinations counter the artificial simulations of experience prevalent in contemporary global media, thereby reinforcing the authentic cultural hybridity of diasporic cinema.

Ultimately, diasporic cinema transcends national cinema by integrating diverse identities and participating in global culture. It complicates notions of national identity and territorial belonging while simultaneously refreshing and strengthening national cinemas. Diasporic cinema thus becomes a vital political and cultural tool, enriching both the homeland and global audiences with its heterogeneous visions. National and diasporic cinemas are therefore interconnected rather than mutually exclusive. Diasporic cinema derives much of its richness from the blending of origin and foreign cultures, allowing both national and diasporic narratives to contribute to global cinematic discourse.

2.1. The Perception of Armenia in Diasporic Films during the Soviet Period

Representation of Armenia and Armenians has always been significant for the cultural delineation of Armenia and the worldwide outbreak of the Armenian issue. For a long period of time, the focus of the diasporic Armenian films was the Armenian genocide. However, the pivotal aspects that make the theme possible and resonate with the Armenian fate have been less observed. Armenian diasporic films have been understood from a single, fixed identification perspective, and Armenian diasporic cinema discourse has remained inside a linear theorization (Bayramian, 2019, 2).

This research formally analyzes the ways various Armenian diasporic subjects, who originate from various Armenian diasporas, negotiate, struggle, and express their homeland. By doing this, the diversity of the Armenian diaspora's identity and means of attaching to the homeland are brought to light. In fact, the negotiations and intersections that occur within other aspects of the subjects' identities help them relate to the Armenian homeland in the diaspora (Bayramian, 2019, 2). This chapter argues that the suggested negotiations and intersections between diaspora representatives with Armenia created an imagined relation to Armenia.

This imagined reflection of Armenia starts with *Ravished Armenia*, a commercial film with a humanitarian context released in 1919 on the Armenian genocide. The film tells the story of Aurora Mardiganian, who plays herself. Oscar Apfel became the first director to shoot a feature film about Armenia in New York. However, it remains contradictory whether the film can be included within the list of Armenian diasporic

films, as the director is not Armenian. Nevertheless, the fact that *Ravished Armenia* is the first with the pivotal Armenia representation is undeniable. Aurora is a specific depiction of Armenia of a particular period (the post-genocide); she embodies "Ravished Armenia" itself. The film serves as a basis for the Armenian diaspora filmmaking community to emerge and develop further in the future.

The representation of Armenia has acquired heterogeneous and distinct characteristics both in the homeland and, specifically, abroad. In the case of homeland experience, the representation becomes possibly more reasonable and realistic, while early diasporic representation is more imagined and fictitious. The filmmaker's experience and perceptions from distance—that is, outside of Armenia—are particularly influential in the Soviet period, when most filmmakers did not have the opportunity to express themselves as Armenians in their homeland; instead, what they merely knew about Armenia was that it is a place of their origin. This factor made the image more complex, but at the same time, brought new notions and perceptions into being. This chapter acknowledges the special interest in uncovering the aspects and elements on which each filmmaker relies while representing Armenia. The initiative of the chapter is the exploration of the aspects that shape Armenia during the Soviet period through the eyes of Armenian diaspora filmmakers.

To represent his image of homeland, diaspora filmmaker Michael Hagopian—born in Kharpert, Ottoman Empire and later settled in Fresno, California—in his documentary *Where Are My People* (1965), leads the film with the rhetorical question "Where are my people?", building the content around this question. Hagopian decided to start with the narration of vital events in the life of Armenians through maps (fig. 1.1), pictures, and other didactic tools (fig. 1.2).

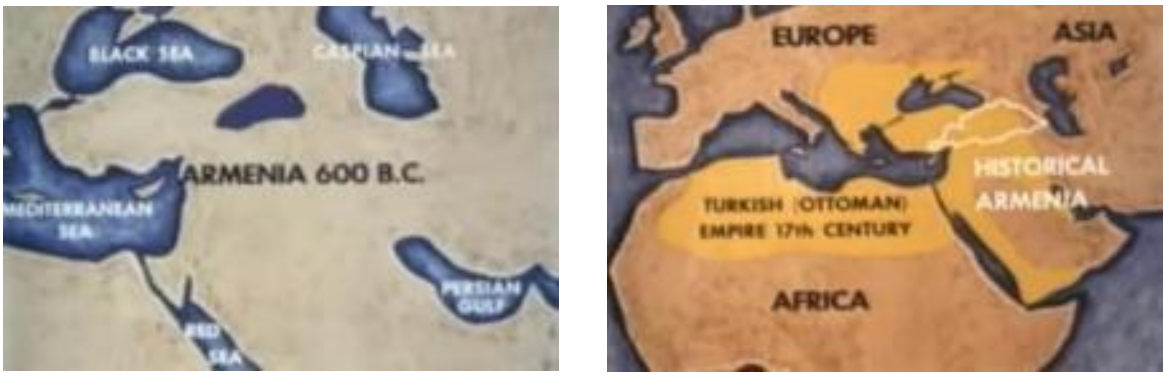

Figure 1.1: Changes of Armenian territory within distinct centuries

Figure 1.2: Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat

The film acknowledges that the previous successes become meaningless under the veil of the present disastrous reality:

> "What happened can happen today or tomorrow. Who can resurrect them; who can feel the horror of their deaths? New generations cannot understand the injustice of yesterday, yet the older generations remain silent as new crimes are committed against humanity." (26:46–27:15)

The truth is that neither success nor failure is fully transformable. The future generation inherits the consequences of their predecessors and continues to experience them. The film uncloses the fact that each Armenian generation, and even each victim, has its own challenges, horror, and trauma that are non-transferable. Here, Armenia is separated into generations and, more distantly, within individuals. Thus, the cinematic representation of Armenia is complex: it cannot be captured from a single perspective; it is distinct, heterogeneous, and unique to each individual.

This heterogeneity forms the distinct aspects of Armenian identity. The individuality of the formation of the image of Armenia is present in many diaspora films. A French Armenian playwright and filmmaker, Henri Verneuil, in his autobiographical film *Mayrig* (1991), continues to sustain the grief of genocide by creating his personal image of Armenia. The film indicates that the Catastrophe became an inseparable part of each survivor's life, together with the stamp *apatride* (in French), *anhayrenik* (in Armenian) (fig. 2), which means 'stateless, without a homeland.' Other survivors bear the marks of a stamp on their bodies (Apkar, with a limp from permanent damage in one foot) that will always remind them of the path they followed. These physical and document stamps are the images that Armenia acquired after the Catastrophe.

Figure 2: Stamp *apatride*, meaning 'stateless, without citizenship'

Furthermore, the film formulates another image of Armenia. It embodies the figure of the mother in three characters—Azat's real mother and his two aunts. This factor emphasizes the strong familial ties within Armenian families. The sacrificial figure of the family is remarkable. All Armenian parents are represented as self-sacrificing characters. The film shows the imperishable place that mothers occupy in the lives of Armenian children. Verneuil thus perceives Armenia specifically through the Armenian mother, family, and its values. Verneuil's autobiography, *Mayrig*, could be treated as the microhistory of the Armenian community of early-20th-century Marseilles (Mkrtchyan, 2021, 6).

Another microhistory of the Armenian Catastrophe is the film *Komitas* (1989) by Don Askarian. Don Askarian was born in Nagorno-Karabakh and later moved to Moscow. Komitas was an Armenian composer, priest, musicologist, singer, and eyewitness to the Armenian genocide. The filmmaker chooses an iconic image of Armenia and its sufferings through the representation of the Armenian genius composer Komitas. The lines "Let us go home together. To Sevan, to Etchmiadsin" (28:59–31:54) emphasize that the image of Armenia for Armenian diaspora, which has never been to Armenia, sometimes become places and figures that show only a partial image of it.

Another imagined image related to Armenia is the revengeful spirit of the Armenian man, seemingly stemming from *fidais* ('freedom fighters'). The development of self-defensive and, in addition, revolutionary ideologies within *fidais* in Armenia can be found in the film *Sons of Sassoun* (1975) by Sarky Mouradian, who was a filmmaker, television host, and music composer born in Beirut. Due to the *fidais*' powerful, fearless, and faithful characteristics, Armenia obtains powerful and moral images. The victim's identity becomes somehow mitigated through the *fidais'* characteristics. In addition, it is mitigated this time through a parallel with the Turkish image (fig. 3), which is depicted as fearful and unconfident. In this film, the Turks are those who exaggerate their deeds and falsify the truth.

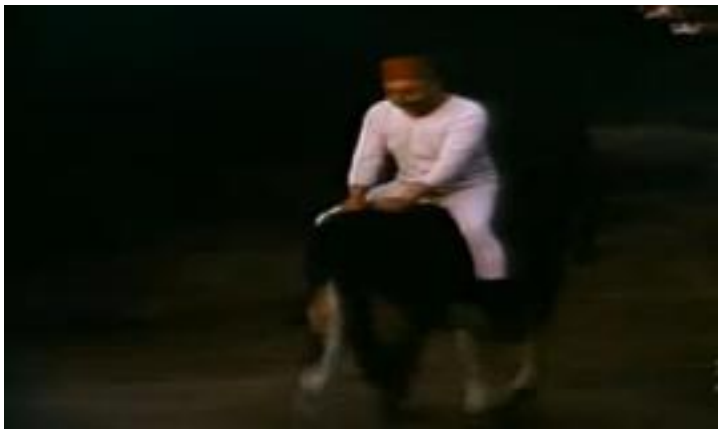

Figure 3: Fearful Turkish sultan punished by an Armenian *fidai*

The flexibility of the problem-solving image of an Armenian like the *fidais* lies also in the documentary film *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1982) by Sarky Mouradian. Mouradian includes an eyewitness account of an American journalist as proof of the happenings. He shows the abandoned character of Armenia. The film raises the assumption that if there had been support from foreign countries, as was the case with Musa Dagh, who received help from France, many more Armenians could have survived. Abandonment remains the image of Armenia that Mouradian builds in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*.

The destructive policy of the Ottoman Empire caused not only the eradication of Armenians from their homeland but also aroused confusion for identity distinction as a result of resettlement in different corners of the world. *California Armenians: The First Generation* (1989) by Michael Hagopian represents the migrations of Armenians from their homeland before the Armenian genocide. The film concentrates on the diasporic life of Armenians in Fresno, California (fig. 4.1). It marks the reasons that made the Armenians leave their country and seek refuge, resulting in a dispersed image of Armenia.

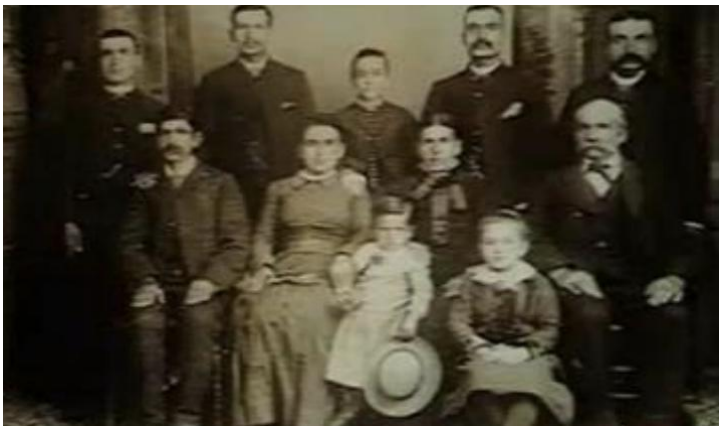

Figure 4.1: Armenian family from Marzavan, Turkey, that settled in California

In Fresno, Armenians felt as if they were in Armenia. The climate and fruits are considered as the main elements that coincide with those in Armenia. All these factors emphasize Armenians' attachment to their cultural life and indicate that their perception of Armenia is not always tied to territory but to these cultural occupations (fig. 4.2). The film shows how Armenians assimilated, developed, and transformed from craftsmen into merchants, major landowners, and industrialists. Independence and, in a sense, the formation of a small Armenia in places where Armenians settle are significant factors. Some Armenians even get rid of the surname suffix *–ian*, behaving as if they side with anti-Armenian sentiment. The love for the climate of Fresno, the cultural occupations, and the abandonment of Armenian surnames show that Armenia is not perceived through a specific territory but through the feeling of something Armenian. Hagopian suggests that Armenia is not an irreplaceable place, and locations where groups of Armenians gather can turn into "Armenia." This explains the dispersed image of Armenia.

Figure 4.2: Occupation of Armenians called *normarts* ('newcomers') in Fresno

Another similar experience with different complications is represented in the feature film *Next of Kin* (1984) by Canadian Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan. This film depicts an Armenian family that immigrated to Canada and, having no money, gave up their son Bedros for adoption. They lived with their daughter, with whom they had constant disputes. Peter Foster, a 23-year-old young man, comes to this family pretending to be their son Bedros. The acknowledgment of Armenia becomes possible through the eyes of a foreigner. The conservative elements of Armenians are evident in the family gatherings.

Despite the disputes and difficulties within the family, the Armenian family is represented as a place where a person is treated as expected. In fact, Egoyan depicts Armenia in this film through the Armenian family. In other words, the image of Armenia is not necessarily tied to the geographical territory of Armenia but to its

characters and values, the preservation of which, in most cases, becomes the responsibility of Armenian families anywhere.

Expanding from the family frame to the boarder Armenian community, the character of Armenia is depicted in the feature film *The Pink Elephant* (1985) by Ara Madzounian, born in Beirut, Lebanon. In this film, the Armenian community, with its traumatized identity, represents the image of Armenia and Armenians. Both *Next of Kin* and *The Pink Elephant* encompass the core elements of the cultural representation of Armenia. While *Next of Kin* presents the perception of Armenia within the framework of family paradigms, *The Pink Elephant* delineates the understanding of Armenia through distinct individuals outside the family, while simultaneously formulating a broad conception of the family as a nation. Thus, the scope of cultural representation in *The Pink Elephant* is broader than that of *Next of Kin*.

In a broader context, the film *An Armenian Journey* (1988) by Theodore Bogosian explores the multiple ways in which a survivor perceives the image of Western and Eastern Armenia. It tells the story of Maria Davis, an Armenian genocide survivor whose family was killed before her eyes. *An Armenian Journey* is extraordinary in that it represents life in Eastern and Western Armenia almost simultaneously. This film perceives Armenia through the survivor (fig. 5), the Armenian spirit, and, more specifically, the Armenian nation. The film portrays Armenia as the wholeness of its Western and Eastern parts. The creation of a connection between Western and Eastern Armenians is remarkable: Eastern Armenia serves as the place for analyzing existing evidence, while Western Armenia functions as the place of recovery and awakening.

Figure 5: Photo of young Maria Davis

The complex, individual-based image of Armenia is obviously the long-term characteristic that prevails in most films. What filmmakers represent are self-formed, imagined images of Armenia, not real Armenia. Mostly, the films focus on something Armenian or on elements that determine Armenianness, such as Armenian trauma, the Armenian mother, Armenian families, Armenian communities, *fidais*, Komitas, but not Armenia itself. The above-mentioned elements are the cornerstones that make the images of Armenia imagined and heterogeneous.

2.2. Post-Soviet Perceptions of Armenia in Diasporic Films

Before the post-Soviet period, almost all nationalistic Armenian fictional and non-fiction films were produced thousands of miles away from Armenia. The understanding of the Armenian filmmakers' multigenerational diasporic rupture and relationship with their ancestral motherland becomes clearer thanks to their independent and personal homecoming films (Bilici, 2016, ii). The face-to-face acquaintance with Armenia in post-Soviet films helps transform an unwelcoming place back into a place of origin. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union opens more space for the recent perception of Armenia. While the Soviet period rarely gave a chance to diasporic representatives to appear in Armenia and apprehend its reality, post-Soviet Armenia opened the gates wider for further realistic acknowledgment.

In most cases, Armenia becomes a place of self-determination, that is, a place of self-acknowledgement, specifically in the case of diasporic filmmakers. The consequences of this self-analysis form recent perceptions. The films discussed here represent remnants of the Soviet period, which are not entirely surmountable even today. This chapter aims to uncover the aspects that have become pivotal for distinct, realistic representations of Armenia.

Most post-Soviet diasporic filmmakers are representatives of experimental cinema. One of them is Gariné Torossian, a Canadian filmmaker, who formulates her perception of the homeland in *Stone, Time, Touch* (2007) through a unique representation. The film features three distinct women, each with a particular role: Kamee Abrahamian, the visitor; Arsinée Khanjian, who has visited Armenia many times and speaks about her relationship to it; and Torossian herself, the observer, who was just taking pictures.

The puzzle that the film attempts to assemble is unique. It represents Armenia from multiple perspectives, with distinct occupations, distinct lifestyles, forms of labor, worries, modes of creativity, memories, and experiences. Armenia is a place marked by limitations, struggles, challenges, and the legacy of genocide survivors, but also a place where spirituality exists, humanity prevails, and the possibility of rebirth persists. In representing the ruined parts of Armenia (38:42–38:58), the film suggests the possible connection of the ruins. The stones, pieces, and relics make and keep Armenia Armenian.

Unlike the stones of Armenia that serve as a point of connection for Torossian, the well-known filmmaker Atom Egoyan highlights a sense of separation in relation to Armenia—one that is quite personal. In his feature film *Calendar* (1993), the first scene shows a car approaching a church, accompanied by traditional music. Mount Ararat, positioned before the moving car and preceded by an endless herd of sheep, functions as a symbol of separation; it gives a fragmented and elusive image of Armenia. It is an Armenia that has lost half of itself and continues to look at the point of rupture—Ararat—as the marker of its separation from Western Armenia.

The main actors in the film are the photographer, his translator (wife), and the driver. Through the driver's interpretations of the churches, Armenia acquires a spiritual image. Armenians devoted the most prominent locations to the construction of churches. Meanwhile, shifting values have altered the imagined perception of Armenia. It is no longer the place that diaspora Armenians were taught to envision in their childhood. Beyond the churches, other contemporary images of Armenia contribute to a growing sense of separation and partition between Armenia and representatives of the Armenian diaspora.

Another point about post-Soviet Armenia is that it is a place where cheating is normal and not rare, especially cheating tourists. (29:17–29:28) Most taxi drivers ask for more money than needed, and tourists are not safe in this respect. Thus, in *Calendar*, the realistic image of Armenia is connective, separative, deceitful, religious, and so on. The embodiment of realistic, heterogeneous images of Armenia resonates in another masterpiece of Gariné Torossian, *Girl from Moush* (1993). This film features Torossian's early endeavors to understand Armenia. The exclamations for Sayat Nova, Ararat, Lake Sevan, Komitas, Ejmiatsin, Yerevan, and beloved Armenia form the prompts of the significances that first come to mind in the process of creating images of Armenia (4:35–4:45).

Mount Ararat is another symbolic image of Armenia that indicates both the unification and the partition of Western and Eastern Armenia. The name of the mountain also became the title of a film by diasporic filmmaker Atom Egoyan. It is an extraordinary work with a distinctive artistic approach, structured as a film within a film. *Ararat* (2002) includes a depiction of Edward Saroyan's filmmaking about the genocide. Another iconic image in *Ararat* is the photograph of Arshile Gorky with his mother, presented by an Armenian art history professor (fig. 6.1). Her lecture shows the image of an Armenian who uses art as a way of consolation.

Figure 6.1: Ani, the art historian, lecturing on Arshile Gorky

As the movie is a film within a film, the other space represents the image of a ravaged Armenia (fig. 6.2). Armenia is a topic that is always on the lips of an Armenian. It continues to be the burden that its generations carry everywhere they go. Armenia is a

country that has lost its western part and has been left without any tangible proof of remembrance of the losses. The hatred toward Armenians was so great that the Turks did not even give them a chance to have places of remembrance.

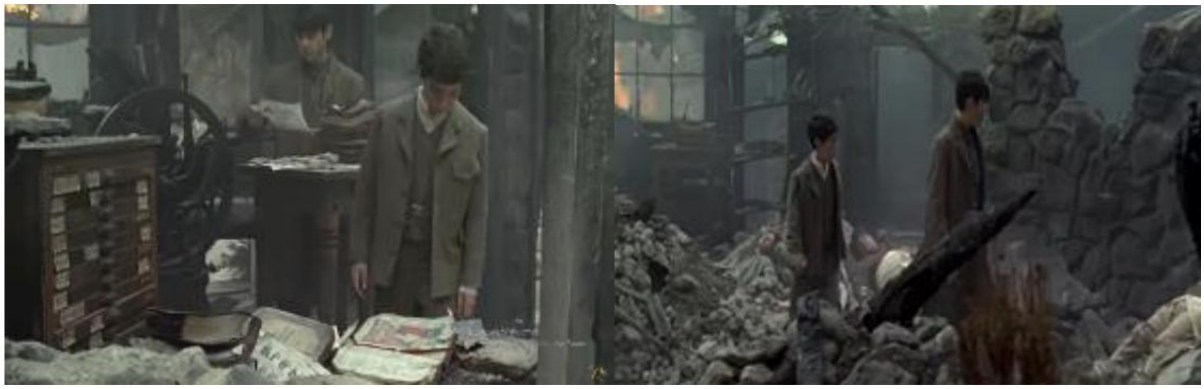

Figure 6.2: Pictures of a ravaged Armenia

Ararat delves into the representation of many Armenian diaspora characters, thus perceiving Armenia through various signifiers, as well as an overarching, complexly connected story of flashbacks, mediated footage, and alternative sub-narratives. The touchable signifiers that formulate an image become the hands of Gorky's mother. Both Gorky and art historian Ani find the hands to be a possible connective image with Armenia. Armenia needs the tangible image, which comes out of its traumatized generation's necessity.

An Armenian Homecoming (2008) by Ani Manoukian King-Underwood is a pilgrimage and detective film that aims to mitigate the lust for a tangible Armenia. The uniqueness of the film relies on the fact that it has a returning initiative to Western Armenia. The earlier films mentioned mostly returned to Eastern Armenia. The film builds the shifting image of Armenia. It shows how rich, fruitful Armenia turned into a ravaged, traumatized, migrant land. The return of two sisters and the first sight of the surroundings of Western Armenia seem to create an impression that there is no longer any image of Armenia in the place where their family used to live. Western Armenia, in this footage, emphasizes the lost-at-first-sight image of Armenia. Finally, this image is to be altered, and the sisters find their apartment, which has turned into an art museum. The revealing of hidden images of their stone house, in chain form, unfolds other characters of Armenian appearance.

My Son Shall Be Armenian (2004) by Hagop Goudsuzian is another homecoming film to Eastern Armenia, even though it was not the initial destination. Goudsuzian's concern is to let his son live without the burden of genocide. Armenia needs to get rid of the image of the burdensome memory. The generations of survivors no longer want to perceive their homeland under the burden of duty toward it. The group of people with whom the filmmaker chooses to travel, in the search for reconciliation regarding the Armenia genocide, is all bearers of that duty. Syria bars the Armenian group from being

in the desert where Armenian deportees walked. Consequently, the group comes to Armenia to walk beside their ancestors, carrying the memories of living witnesses (12:15–12:21). Now, Armenia is perceived as a mythified country that needs demystification (14:06-14:10, 14:26–14:36). However, the Armenian image acquires reinvigorating and inspiring characteristics.

The mortal image of Armenia in *My Son Shall Be Armenian* is the survivors of genocide living in Eastern Armenia. At some points, the reattaining of the lost becomes possible. This was the case with Nor Marash (27:25–27:57). Armenia acquires a consoling image thanks to rebuilding and naming some cities after their Western Armenian counterparts. As a consistent carrier of a consoling image, Armenia also possesses some objects from Western Armenian cities, such as those from Kaysaria (soil, photographs, clothing) (28:51–29:37). The filmmaker himself states that a healed image of Armenia can only be possible if all nations of the world, and Turkey itself, recognize the Armenian genocide (1:17:48–1:18:05). Thus, the film embarks on all the possible and impossible, desirable and undesirable, mystified and demystified, healed and unhealed images that Armenia, in its wholeness, has or needs to have.

Hence, the complex images of Armenia have become realistic in the post-Soviet perceptions of Armenia. The components forming these realistic images of Armenia include the connective, separative, deceitful, religious, traumatized, concealing, inheritable suffering, and defective characteristics revealed in the post-Soviet films. The positive side of the emerging Armenian image is the possibilities it suggests for diasporic people, such as healing, regretting not having shared and asking for details from ancestors, consolidating, and rebuilding some Western Armenian cities in Eastern Armenia. In addition, the new era provides opportunities not only for a return to Eastern but also to Western Armenia, where the previously hidden, rich, and fruitful Armenian images are now found ravaged, traumatized, and migrant images.

2.3. Armenia in Contemporary Diasporic Films

The contemporary works of Armenian diaspora filmmakers demonstrate that Armenia continues to maintain its deficient images, even adding to or uncovering its recent negative characteristics. The films that I analyze next enlarge the scope of the explosion of Armenian images. These works portray the condition of Armenia—its neglected and painful corners. They are unique in the sense that, unlike earlier films, in most cases, there are no perceptions presented by the filmmakers. This practice of perception is almost entirely left to the audience. Thus, this chapter takes the initiative not only to unfold the images of Armenia but also to unearth the perceptions that contemporary films generate.

The films emphasize that although Armenia has been out of Soviet control for a long time, the country, unfortunately, has not managed to overcome the anomalies it possessed. The deficient character of Armenian society is still present which resonates

in the film *140 Drams* (2012) by Oksana Mirzoyan. Oksana Mirzoyan is an Armenian American artist engaged in narrative filmmaking as a writer, director, and producer. This film by Mirzoyan represents an Armenian family in which the father has no job and no money; consequently, the family has no food (fig. 7). Hence, we see how the family's poor conditions lead one of its members to become a robber. This is the point at which we may assume why robbery became so frequent and widespread in Armenia. Mirzoyan views Armenia as a remnant and consequence of the Soviet period. She insists on its destructive impact, which has led Armenia to its current condition.

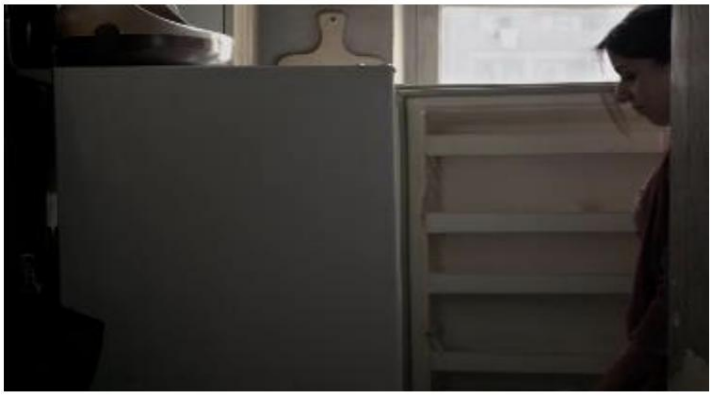

Figure 7: Empty refrigerator of an Armenian family

Tamara Stepanian, a filmmaker born in Armenia who later moved to Lebanon, expands to expose the still-existing consequences of the destructive impacts of the Soviet period, as shown in *The Village of Women* (2019). The director represents the life of Armenian women. She depicts an Armenian village called Lichk, where the women are responsible for the plow and the harvest; they even drive the tractors (fig. 8). The lack of men in the village manifests itself as a natural phenomenon. The women have adapted to the conditions, working together to find solutions. Except for a few elderly men, every male villager spends nine months of the year working in Russia. Armenia does not have any employment. Migration of men became the solution to the issue of unemployment that Mirzoyan revealed.

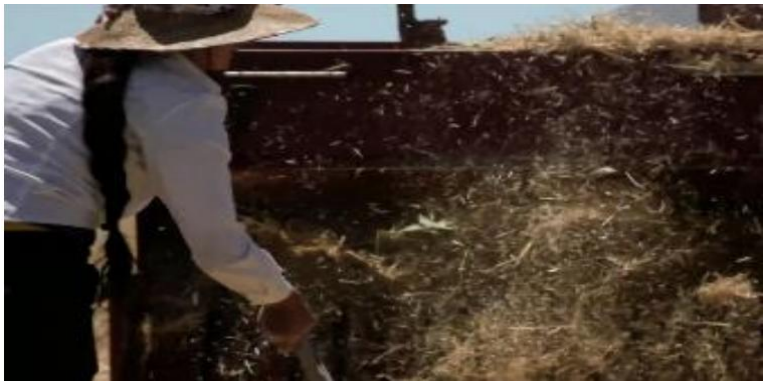

Figure 8: Armenian woman laboring in the village of Lichk

Grandma's Tattoos (2011) by Suzanne Khardaliam continues to accrue the still-burdensome images of Armenia. Khardalian's motivation for this documentary was her grandmother. Central to the film are the grandmother's tattoos, which symbolize the call of the homeland. Khardalian discovered a photograph of her grandmother bearing black tattoos (fig. 9). These tattoos initially disgusted Khardalian, and she was afraid of her grandmother. It was only later that she learned that the tattoos were marks of slavery imposed during the Armenian Catastrophe. There was no article on the fate of women. One feature of the Armenian mentality affected the concealment of the image of women: Armenian male pride, which prohibited any reference to violence against women. Armenia is a place where truth is concealed, and deceit is preferred because of shame. The realistic image of Armenia is more like a box full of secrets. Khardalian dives into this box to find out that her grandmother was raped. Khardalian's representation is unique, as she put aside the fear stemming from the "shameful" stain of her family (44:53–45:03). This reveals the traumatized, concealed, shameful, and deceived image of Armenia.

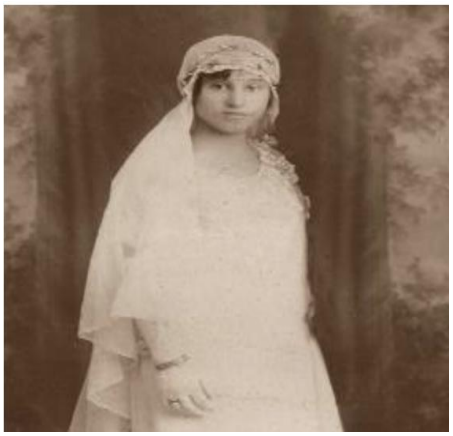

Figure 9: Photo of Khardalian's grandmother with tattoos

Marlene Edoyan is a Canadian Armenian filmmaker with a background in film and media studies. Her film *Figure of Armen* (2012) is a documentary which brings to the surface the unspoken and concealed images of Armenia. The unique images the film uncovers are those of Javakhk, which is now under the rule of Georgia, and of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. The title itself justifies the content, as the film uncovers the hidden and untold figures of Armenia. The film mostly focuses on the village life of Armenians in Armenia, Javakhk, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The key component found in these various corners of Armenia is the figure of the Armenian as a migrant: "What is there in Armenia? I am happy to be closer to my family members, but life is difficult here." (04:14–04:34). In an Armenian city, Alaverdi, a man reveals that only 5% of the population is involved in copper production in the country, while the others are either unemployed or work abroad (24:32–24:43).

The bellicose image of Armenia is specifically found in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Karabakh is a conflict-ridden region between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It is a place that always requires struggle. The Armenian nation constantly fights for Karabakh: "The future of Armenia starts with Karabakh" (36:10–36:20). The Armenian image is reflected in the close yet simultaneously distant image of Karabakh. Another neglected image of Armenia, which the film touches upon, is Samtskhe-Javakheti (Javakhk) in Georgia. The indifferent treatment of Armenia toward its residents in distinct parts of Javakhk is evident. Meanwhile, a villager in Javakhk claims: "Only Yerevan cannot represent Armenia. Armenia cannot be without Javakhk. Otherwise, Armenia would be missing an important element." (49:30–50:00). The film shows that Armenia surrenders significant components of its image. The Armenian government does not treat its neighboring diasporic people—that is, Javakhk people—in a proper way.

Armenian Rhapsody (2012) is a road movie by the directors Cassiana Der Haroutiounian, Cesar Gananian, and Gary Gananian. The film is extraordinary because of its unpredictable transitions and the way it explores multiple topics, weaving new images of Armenia. In this film, viewers encounter the contradictory aspects of the Armenian image. Armenia appears welcoming yet uncaring, self-sacrificing yet unrewarding, faithful yet superstitious. The superstitious side of Armenia is revealed when a woman predicts the future from a cup of coffee (fig. 10). The movie ends with joyful notes; however, it is not a happy ending, as the wedding underscores the ongoing migration of Armenians.

Figure 10: Woman turning a coffee cup to predict the future

Nare Mkrtchyan is a filmmaker born in Armenia, raised in Los Angeles. She combines both American filmmaking techniques and the international, independent spirit. Her film *The Other Side of Home* (2016) is the only film in this research collection that presents the experience of a Turkish Armenian, which shapes the halved image of Armenia. The filmmaker meets a woman named Maya, who claims: "I am a Turkish person who discovered I have Armenian heritage" (06:38–06:58). Maya's great-grandmother was

Armenian. She was rescued by Maya's great-grandfather, and they immediately fell in love. The great-grandmother was 13 or 14 and had to convert (fig. 11). The film brings to the surface hidden and somehow halved images of Armenia. Maya and similar people are the roots and basis of such an image. Maya travels to Armenia to participate in the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide: "I am worried about this trip because now it is personal. I could go anywhere; it is a totally different thing than being there with the conflict. I mean, I am the conflict." (12:37–12:57). Armenian identity left some of its bearers with an enduring conflict over their halved identity.

Figure 11: Armenian who converted to Islam

Consequently, the contemporary representation of Armenia in films after 2010 reaffirms that the country continues to carry its painful and problematic images; indeed, new negative depictions have emerged, such as the portrayal of superstitious Armenia, despite its identity as a faithful nation. Armenia remains a country grappling with economic challenges, migration, trauma, and deceit. At times, the burden of being Armenian compels its residents to adapt flexibly to any changes. Armenia provides limited support to both its Eastern residents and its resettled Western Armenians. It serves as a commemorative place for diaspora Armenians but remains an unfulfilled claimant. Nevertheless, Armenia also embodies a restorative image, seeking to repair what was broken for Western Armenians. Moreover, for the first time, a film includes previously untold aspects of Armenia—namely, Nagorno-Karabakh and Javakhk. Migrants are no longer exclusively young men departing for work; they also include women marrying abroad. Armenia has thus acquired an image in which living abroad is perceived as more prestigious than living in the homeland.

3. Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis, Armenian diasporic cinema is part of global culture, which, through its reference to the homeland, brings the national cinema close to the global platform as well. The nuanced observation of the two cinemas shows that the national and diasporic cinemas together comprise distinct identities. The diversity of national cinema is partly due to the diaspora. More specifically, national cinema is not singular, as the notion of national cinema is applied prescriptively rather than descriptively, indicating what the national cinema ought to be rather than representing the real cinematic experiences of audiences. The heterogeneity of diasporic cinema is due to the inclusion of both the culture of origin and the foreign culture. Through these foreign elements, diasporic cinema, together with national cinema, becomes part of international cultural production. They are components of global culture and global cinema.

Further analysis of Armenian diaspora cinema retreated from linear identification of Armenian diaspora films, sought various directions and focused on distinct diasporic filmmakers to uncover Armenia in their films.

Chapter 2.1 established the initiative to expose the Soviet images of Armenia. It began with the first attempts at visual representation of the destroyed character of Armenia and reached the confrontation between its Eastern and Western parts. Various filmmakers rely on distinct aspects when representing Armenia. In fact, what filmmakers represent are self-formed, imagined images of Armenia and not the real Armenia. The concentration was mainly on something Armenian or on determining Armenianness—an Armenian mother, Armenian families, Armenian communities, *fidais*, Komitas, survivors, etc.—but not Armenia itself. These elements are the components that made the Soviet images of Armenia imagined and unrealistic.

Chapter 2.2 delineates how the post-Soviet period's images obtained a realistic conceptualization because diasporic filmmakers were allowed to come to Armenia. The films reveal that the complex imagery of post-Soviet Armenia is shaped by themes of connection, division, deception, spirituality, trauma, concealment, inherited pain, and flaws. Meanwhile, the positive side of the emerging Armenian image lies in the possibilities it suggests for diasporic people, such as healing, consolidation, and rebuilding of some Western Armenian cities in Eastern Armenia.

Chapter 2.3 analyzes the contemporary images of Armenia in films after 2010, showing that Armenia still retains its painful, problematic images while acquiring new negative ones, such as superstitions. There are also other defective aspects: Armenia is a country with economic problems, migrants, trauma, and deceit. Armenia is not supportive either towards its Eastern residents or towards resettled Western Armenians. Nevertheless, Armenia also bears a reparative image in relation to restoring what was broken for Western Armenians. For the first time, one of the films includes

untold figures of Armenia, more specifically, Nagorno-Karabakh and Javakhk, each with its own distinct imagery.

Thus, the emergence of diasporic cinema brought Armenian filmmaking onto the global stage, not only due to the inability to preserve a purely national identity but also through the recognition that maintaining such purity was futile. Diasporic filmmakers' interactions with Armenia gave rise to new ideas. The complex traits of Armenian imagery found more nuanced interpretations. Furthermore, the division between Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian diaspora cinema enabled a conceptualization of Soviet era imagined images versus post-Soviet realistic portrayals of Armenia. Additionally, contemporary diasporic films continue to reaffirm the awkward post-Soviet images that persist, either expanding upon them or uncovering new problematic aspects.

Primary Sources: Films

1. *140 Drams*. (2012). Directed by Oksana Mirzoyan.
2. *An Armenian Homecoming*. (2008). Directed by Ani Manoukian King-Underwood.
3. *An Armenian Journey*. (1988). Directed by Ted Bogosian.
4. *Ararat*. (2002). Directed by Atom Egoyan.
5. *Armenian Rhapsody*. (2012). Directed by Cassiana Der Haroutiounian, Cesar Gananian, and Gary Gananian.
6. *Calendar*. (1993). Directed by Atom Egoyan.
7. *California Armenians: The First Generation*. (1965). Written by J. Michael Hagopian.
8. *Figure of Armen*. (2012). Directed by Marlene Edoyan.
9. *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. (1982). Directed by Sarky Mouradian.
10. *Girl from Moush*. (1993). Directed by Gariné Torossian.
11. *Grandma's Tattoos*. (2011). Directed by Suzanne Khardalian.
12. *Komitas*. (1988). Directed by Don Askarian.
13. *Mayrig*. (1991). Directed by Henri Verneuil.
14. *My Son Shall Be Armenian*. (2004). Directed by Hagop Goudsuzian.
15. *Next of Kin*. (1984). Directed by Atom Egoyan.
16. *Ravished Armenia*. (1919). Directed by Oscar Apfel.
17. *Sons of Sassoun*. (1975). Directed by Sarky Mouradian.
18. *Stone, Time, Touch*. (2007). Directed by Gariné Torossian.
19. *The Other Side of Home*. (2016). Directed by Nare Mkrtchyan.
20. *The Pink Elephant*. (1988). Directed by Ara Madzounian.
21. *Village of Women*. (2019). Directed by Tamara Stepanyan.
22. *Where are my People?*. (1965). Written and produced by J. Michael Hagopian.

Bibliography

Bayramian, Sh. P. (2019). Exploring Armenian Diasporic Cinema from the "Third Space" [MA thesis]. University of Amsterdam.

Bilici, K. (2016). Post-Exilic Armenian "Homecoming" Films: Working-through the Traumatic Postmemory of 1915 [MA thesis]. Carleton University. https://doi.org/10.22215/etd/2016-11740

Choi, J. (2011). National Cinema: An Anachronistic Delirium? Journal of Korean Studies, 16(2), 173–191. https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2011.0012

Conti, L. (2012). National Cinema, Kinatay. Film 106.

Higson, A. (1989). The Concept of National Cinema. Screen, 30(4), 36–47. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.4.36

Kévorkian, R. (2011). The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Marks, L. U. (2000). The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses. Duke University Press https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381372

Mkrtchyan, M. (2021). Communicating Memories Through Autobiography: A Semiotic analysis of *Mayrig* by Henri Verneuil [MA thesis]. University of Tartu.

Naficy, H. (2001). An Accented Cinema; Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking. Princeton University Press.

Türk, M. S., Darı, A. B., & Avcı, Ö. (2022). Communism Propaganda in Soviet Armenia. Review of Armenian Studies, (45), 151–175.