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INTERVIEW

Tamara Stepanyan on *My Armenian Phantoms*

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We met Armenian-born filmmaker Tamara Stepanyan at the Golden Apricot Film Festival (13–20 July) to speak to her about "My Armenian Phantoms," an homage to the country's rich cinematic history. Stepanyan speaks about her family history, its ties to Armenian cinema, and the revelatory process of revisiting personal and collective pasts.

Like Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, what you're presenting is a history of cinema, yet you have your own approach that is also a personal history and the history of a certain cinematic tradition. You start with the beginnings of Armenian cinema, with the films of Beknazarian, and follow this tradition up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. So how did you manage to put together this history of cinema, particularly with these archives?

You know, what was interesting was that when I started this project, the birth of this project was linked to mourning, the death of my father. So I started looking at photos, images, videos. And I thought to myself… That's it. I didn't want to make a film about mourning. That was clear to me from the beginning. When I started looking into my project a bit, I had a friend who said to me, and I admit that at the time I hadn't seen Godard's film, "have you seen Godard's film, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*?" He said, "You have to see it, because it could inspire you, either you accept it, or you can do something completely different."

Indeed, when I saw Godard's film, I said, "But actually, this is a Godard film." Godard is the only one who can do Godard films. I don't want to do all that. I wanted to do something that was a history of cinema, but there's the story of Tamara also. Tamara, the filmmaker. Tamara, the immigrant. Tamara, the woman looking for her home, trying to understand what it means to be at home.

But there's also the issue of how the history of Armenia has been represented through cinema. And how this cinema, Soviet cinema in Armenia, was able to give a kind of structure to our lives. That is to say, an entire people grew up with and were educated through this cinematic tradition.

What also interested me was that this form of propaganda cinema is not just propaganda cinema. This cinema also includes some absolutely extraordinary films. There are some magnificent films.

Today, as an Armenian filmmaker, I am fascinated when I watch these films, I think to myself, how could these men, who were just men, be so inventive and creative despite the censorship, despite all the rules they had to follow. They had succeeded.

And what exactly were these rules? How did filmmakers manage to get around them? Was it the idea of a national identity inscribed in internationalist discourse?

Yes, because what was the Soviet Union? I mean, there were things to criticize about the Soviet Union, but in fact not everything about it was so bad. Because it's also thanks to the Soviet Union that cinema was able to exist in that country. We mustn't forget that the Soviets decided that there would be a film industry to promote their own ideology. They didn't do it for any other reason. They said, "what is the simplest and most direct way to reach the people? Cinema." Cinematography was invented in Armenia to serve their ideology, whether it was under Stalin or Brezhnev, the message depended on the political context.

One of the main ideological messages was that the patriarchy in Armenia was bad. The other was that we, the Soviets, came to save the Armenians from other empires because Armenia was in a state of ruin after the genocide. After the genocide, Armenia was in a catastrophic state. Turkey had done what it had done, killed a million and a half Armenians. And then the Soviets arrived to "save" the Armenians, so to speak. I say "save" in quotation marks. But at the same time, they also helped the Armenians get back on their feet. Except that Armenians also had to adhere to their ideology. One of the ideas was to create equality between men and women. The other was that the Soviet Union was going to provide work for everyone and that this work would make people beautiful. You know, there was a saying in the Soviet Union, that the more you work, the more beautiful you become.

And also, it was their idea to say that the Armenian patriarchy was not good at all. That's why if you look at early Armenian films – *Namus*, or *Zare* by Hamo Beknazarian, who was, in my opinion, a very feminist filmmaker – the story relates how there's a father who's beating his daughter, a husband who kills

etc. Because that's Armenia before the Soviet Union. It's Armenia in the 1800s.

And so, among all these films, there are some that were censored – was it because they were more avant-garde or more New Wave?

There are some, I think, that were censored to a considerable degree. There are some that, despite the censorship, managed to get their nationalist message across. I'll give you an example: Henrik Malyan's *Triangle*. It's a film about people who work in a forge during WWII. And then they're saying, come on guys, we have to go and fight because the Armenians fought alongside the Russians, and when all the soldiers are going to war they sing a song: an Armenian rebellious song called "Zartir lao." A song that was banned during the Soviet Union, because it celebrated Armenian independence. So the films always have a hidden message, which often came across in songs. Same thing with *Zangezur*, by Beknazarian. It's a piece of pure propaganda in saying that the Red Army is coming to save the Armenians. At one point in the film, someone from the Red Army kills the nationalists. But there's another song that says, "*chase away the wolves so we can live again.*" And who are the wolves? They're the Red Army. You see, there was always this kind of contrasting nationalist message, which stated that we Armenians are not going to completely bow down to the Soviet Union.

Can you tell us a little about the film that you yourself starred in as a kid? In *My Armenian Phantoms*, you feature a segment from that film which shows young children being killed. More generally, could you speak about your childhood steeped in cinema – your father, your family?

When I was a kid, we had this tradition of watching Armenian films on TV. It wasn't just me – everyone watched Armenian films. We were a very cinephilic family. My dad was in the film industry, my mom was in the music industry, and both my grandparents also worked in cinema. So yes, I have a lot of memories, a lot of emotions tied to that time.

As I look back now, I realize there were many questions swirling around, because I grew up in a family where my mother was quite anti-Soviet, while my father was very pro-Soviet. There was a real tension there – it was unspoken, but present.

My mother used to take me to church in secret. No one knew. She never told anyone she was taking me. That was her form of resistance.

It was an interesting time. I was exploring a lot – ideas, beliefs. And kids back

then were different. Today, you tell your kids to go to bed at 8:30. But back then, no one cared if I slept or not. I would sit there, listening to adults talk about cinema, ideologies, humanism, Marxism, people who were imprisoned because a poet had said something the Soviets didn't like.

Around that time, my uncle was preparing to direct a film about the war, seen through the eyes of children. He came to our house to do a casting session.

The images you see of me with my parents, when I was six years old – those were the casting sessions. That was the beginning of the film. He eventually made it, and it was quite extraordinary. He really managed to make the space feel like child's play.

We didn't feel like we were doing anything heavy. We knew about the wars, but we didn't fully grasp the violence or the consequences. He would say to me: "You're in prison now; you have to keep going. You're in the cinema now, you're watching, you're thinking." It was playful, yet meaningful.

What's interesting is that when I watched those images – of my father and the others – I had this strong feeling that it was my father who had taken me by the hand and led me into the world of cinema. We made a circle, like in traditional dances. I was dancing with all these ghosts. And I asked myself: am I becoming a ghost too? I loved that film.

Now I'm really into old movies. That's my life. I watch films by great filmmakers – Douglas Sirk, for example. I love them.

So suddenly, I found myself at home in this world – exploring, dancing with these spirits – and I began to understand what Armenian cinema really meant. It made me wonder: who are we, the heirs of this tradition? Can I call myself a heir to Armenian cinema?

I grew up in Armenia, then moved to Dijon, Beirut, Denmark, Paris… Who says I represent Armenian cinema today? People proudly say, "Tamara is an Armenian filmmaker." But maybe that film made me eligible to truly be one. That's something I've been reflecting on deeply.

Nostalgia as a kind of restoration; the idea of finding a sense of home again; and also the impossibility of returning, are constant themes in the film. They are also a common trait in the works of directors you admire – like Malyan…

Yes, after watching all these films, and going over so many archives, I feel eligible now. Restored, even. Like I've gone through a kind of healing process.

It's been therapeutic – both in terms of mourning my father and in terms of

understanding my cinema. Today, I can proudly say: I am an Armenian filmmaker. I know Armenian cinema intimately. There are so many young people today who don't really know that history. When they hear "Soviets," they shut down. But I say: come and see. There's so much to learn. It's not just Tarkovsky and Antonioni – there's a whole tradition here that's rich and meaningful.

It's like finding pearls. What do you do with them? You clean them, care for them, present them beautifully. And pearls make me think of beauty.

You said earlier that these films are magnificent. Do you find beauty in them?

Absolutely. I love them. Truly.

There were so many times I cried in front of those images. The 35mm reels. We had to clean them, preserve them, breathe life into them again because they were stored in delicate conditions.

What did you find beautiful about them?

The simplicity. There was a lot of work behind it, but the result had this effortless clarity. And simplicity, to me, is a kind of genius. It's not about being banal.

There was simplicity in the stories, in the way things were done – the staging, the camera movement, the performances. But there was also complexity: in the sound design, in the images. It was layered.

Today, I'm actually quite pessimistic about Armenian fiction cinema. Very pessimistic.

Why?

I've made a lot of documentaries, and I think there's a lot of talent in that space in Armenia. But fiction film in Armenia, it's not good. It's sad.

Could you tell us about the film that you are currently working on yourself?

Sure. Actually, I made two films at the same time. Let’s call it a new film, but it feels strange because I finished them both together. One may have wrapped a few months earlier, but they really ran parallel in my life.

It’s called *Le Pays d’Arto – Arto’s Country*. Arto is a war veteran from Armenia. The film will open the Locarno Festival on 6 August at the Piazza Grande, and I’m very proud of that, not least because this film, too, represents Armenian cinema. It’s a French-Armenian production.

Is it a fiction film, or a documentary?

Fiction. Completely. It’s my first fiction film. And it’s about war trauma.

What does it mean to be a deeply committed fighter? What does it mean when you’ve seen so much blood, so much pain, and decide to stop? People might call you a deserter, but you don’t see yourself that way. You’re a hero who’s trying to start a new life, yet you can’t talk about the trauma – not with your wife, not with your children.

Twenty years later, another war comes. He’s a veteran from the 1993 war. With the new conflict in Karabakh, he realizes he never truly buried his trauma. Armenia loses the war, and he takes his own life.

That’s the backstory. The film begins just after his suicide. His wife, played by Camille Cottin, travels to Armenia to sort out his papers. In the process, she discovers that he had changed his name. What follows is a road movie – she meets Arto’s fellow veterans, learns about his past, and slowly comes to understand who he really was. It’s a journey of mourning, discovery, and transmission – for her and for her children.

Thank you for the interview.