

REVIEW

Heart in Hand

Shoghakat Vardanyan's *1489* (2023)

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Screened at the Armenian Film Festival London (6–8 December 2024), Shoghakat Vardanyan's documentary *1489* (2023) is a raw, immersive, hard-to-watch debut by a talented auteur. Vardanyan collected intimate glimpses into her family's uncertainty and grief after the disappearance of the director's twenty-one-year-old brother who served as a soldier in Armenia's recent war with Azerbaijan.

1489 is a haunting exploration of grief amid the unfolding tragedy of the 2020 Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) War. The director's younger brother Soghomon, a classical musician, disappeared in the war zone without a trace on the seventh day of combat. The war would last 44 days, with many soldiers ending up dead or "missing in action." The catastrophe of Artsakh is still unfolding, as thousands of Armenian people have been displaced from their homes this year.

The film is anchored in the number 1489, assigned to her brother's bones when they were eventually found. Briefly after one of the most captivating moments in the film, when her father catches and plays with a little bird, they finally find him on his birthday: "Bones. There's a code on them, Soghomon's code is 1489." The suspense of the unavoidable painfully drives Vardanyan's film until it finds closure.

Vardanyan captures her ordeal with an unfiltered lens, shaky hands, and tears in her eyes. I was glued to the screen, with a lump in my throat. Vardanyan's film is a powerful anti-war manifesto, showing how the human cost of war transcends all borders. Her pain is everyone's pain, a poignant message in a region torn apart by multiple wars.

Studying journalism at the time, Vardanyan, who had never made a film before, started documenting her family's search for her brother with her phone, without budget or training. She continued for another two years, until they received the DNA match with bones found on the battlefield. Vardanyan's brave film contrasts the precarity of domestic life with the anonymous horror of war that each and everyone faces on their own.

In the opening scene, her father, a stonemason, compares the art of war to using the right chisel for each stone: "Imagine sharpening a chisel for fine work, for a delicate finish, but then hammering it like a rough tool, against hard granite. Tougher stones need blunter chisels, to resist the impact and not break. He was a fine boy, but his feelings, mind, could be broken, he could be a victim of those uneducated rough commanders and those that do not teach the art of war but simply do nothing. To go and, God forbid, dying like that..."

The film subtly criticizes the nationalistic fervor that fuels every conflict, juxtaposing it with the quiet resilience of the people. Should one sacrifice one's life for the freedom of a nation? The TV blasts in the background as the camera retraces the walls plastered with sketches of icons and sculptures. Vardanyan and her father visit a military base where some soldiers are still teenagers while we see her mother sewing pillowcases for the front - her hands fragmented, cut-off from her body by the camera.

1489 has almost no music, for there is no sound left in the void of the absence of the director's brother. Vardanyan's own background in music shaped the filming. She did not think about what she wanted to do with the material, Vardanyan said on a video call from Rome: "I was trying to understand what the material wants from me. I was the instrument in the editing process." At some point, she shaves off her hair, becoming a soldier. On the wall behind her, we read the words: "When languages die, so do nations."

The film at times turns from touching to heavy-handed - an unpolished and immediate expression of pain. Winning the main award and the FIPRESCI Prize at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) last year, *1489* was praised by the jury of the International Competition as "an unforgettable example of cinema as an act of love." It also just won the Best Film award at the Rome International Documentary Festival. It is an impressive, brave documentary that comes straight from the heart, not the head.