AFTER DREAMING

Director Christine Haroutounian

Armenia, USA, Mexico | 2025
105 min. | Armenian with English subtitles

Screenplay Christine Haroutounian. **Cinematography** Evgeny Rodin. **Editing** Kiss Karamian. **Sound** Design María Alejandra Rojas, Arturo Salazar. **Production Design** Lusine Sargsyan. **Casting** Ashkhen Grigoryan. **Producers** Brad Becker-Parton, Christine Haroutounian. **Executive Producers** Maxwell Schwartz, Carlos Reygadas. **Co-Producer** Mkrtich Baroyan. **Production companies** Mankazar (Yerevan, Armenien), Seaview (New York, USA). **With** Veronika Poghosyan, Davit Beybutyan.

Synopsis

In an Armenia after war, yet before peace, an itinerant well-digger is mistaken for an enemy and killed by villagers. Wanting to withhold the news from their daughter Claudette, the victim's family requests a haggard soldier named Atom to take Claudette away on a road trip until the funeral is over. On the road, as Atom and Claudette find themselves increasingly drawn to each other's mysteries, their journey turns into an intimate drift through the scarred spaces of a war-torn country. Rather than follow a linear plot, Christine Haroutounian's hypnotic, highly stylized debut feature unfolds like snatches from a fever dream, through spellbinding vignettes steeped in the mythologies of war, nation, family and religion. The strikingly original handheld cinematography makes creative use of fuzzy focus, driving the imagery to the edge of abstraction, while repetitions in speech, gesture and action are mobilized into a ritualistic, musical rhythm – most bracingly in an elaborate wedding scene that works up an incantatory, trance-like atmosphere. Defying naturalism and facile psychology, AFTER DREAMING draws viewers into a singular space-time experience, an adventure in vision. (Srikanth Srinivasan)

Born in Los Angeles, **Christine Haroutounian** is a director, writer, and producer working between Armenia and the diaspora. **AFTER DREAMING**, her debut feature film, will have its world premiere at the 75ᵗʰ Berlinale. Haroutounian is named one of Filmmaker Magazine's 25 New Faces of Independent Film. Her short film WORLD (2020) was chosen for Official Selection at numerous festivals including International Film Festival Rotterdam and won the Golden Apricot Stone Prize at the Golden Apricot International Film Festival in Yerevan.

Films: 2020: Ashkhar / World. 2025: After Dreaming.

Director's Statement

At the Foot of Mount Ararat

The landscape gives rise to fundamental questions of existence

AFTER DREAMING is my first feature film. Set in my motherland, Armenia, the contrasts are extreme. But that's life in the plains of Mount Ararat, the biblical landing place of No-ah's Ark. My family originates somewhere nearby, under the awe-inspiring spectacle of this alien mountain, where it all started. The immensity and chaos of existence. The beauty and darkness, from which everything emerges.

Abject, sublime, primal – and then, a girl and a soldier floating in the tide of destiny, an immeasurable ocean, in a country that is landlocked, forsaken, shining. Where did we come from? Where are we going? Who are we? We wait our whole lives for the mist to clear, but deep down it feels good to vanish.

Christine Haroutounian

Interview

"At the edge of seeing, I felt I could see more."

Christine Haroutounian speaks to Christiane Büchner and Gary Vanisian about filming in Armenia, following her intuition and focusing on what is present

Christiane Büchner: Christine, your film doesn't seem to need a plot. I wonder how you developed the plot lines of the film together with the visuals?

Christine Haroutounian: Everything starts from a feeling that I can't really forget or get rid of. The best and clearest way I can put it is that I was inspired by Neptune. In astrology, Neptune is the planet of delusion, dreams, illusions, the oceanic deception, drowning in the subconscious, ecstasy, addiction. It has the possibility of being the highest height in art, beauty and divinity. And it's also this all-consuming confusion. I'm very magnetized by its dissolving nature. I never sit down with a subject in mind. I started writing the earliest form of the script in 2019, and it always had a soldier and a girl in it, but I never sat down and thought that I was going to make anything directly about war. I don't even see AFTER DREAMING as a war film. This was before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War broke out in 2020. In many ways, I was living in this total blissful ignorance about this conflict. It was frozen, a thing of the past. It was something that never punctured my reality. Thus, everything started from this very specific life context that I happen to be part of and that turned into its own fiction.

Gary Vanisian: You were born and raised in Los Angeles into an Armenian family. What is your motivation to make films in Armenia?

CH: My family is Iranian-Armenian. My parents have never been to Armenia, even though we are Armenian. There is, or was, a very big Armenian community in Iran. My family is not patriotic in any sense and there was a total rejection of my Armenianness growing up. But I also felt that there had been a very big mistake in my being born in the US. That is the biggest cruelty of it. I just feel so alienated by American culture, it still very much feels like something I can't really grasp. The fact that I ended up in Armenia, making these films and having such a strong connection to the country, is quite a surprise to my family because none of those sentiments were there growing up, until I went to Armenia for the first time with my high school class. I always said that I'd go back and make films there, but it wasn't a conscious decision, it was a fantasy. It's the clearest, straightest line I've had in my life. I just considered myself an artist. Armenia is where I've been able to plant these ideas into the soil. It's in America that I don't know who I am. Maybe that's why my filmmaking is very physical and sensorial.

CB: It's interesting because now I understand better why the material aspect of your filmmaking is extremely convincing and also disturbing at the same time. In many scenes I have the feeling that I'm in a stage rehearsal. Sentences are being repeated, somehow the scene seems to start again. It's very experimental. Plus, the work of the camera is extremely central. How did you develop this language and work with your Director of Photography?

CH: The images absolutely drive the narrative. Not to say that there is no plot, it's just not the central engine of the work. When I arrived to Armenia for pre-production, we had very little time, but I had had two years of going all over the country and doing location scouting, and I had very deeply internalized this film. The script was very descriptive, even though it was short, but it was very much about the places and what we're seeing through the frame. I was a photographer before I went into film and when I started to work with my cinematographer for **AFTER DREAMING**, I was basically explaining to him what the shot list was going to be. I had pages and pages of this very detailed film from start to finish. But once we started shooting, nothing was working, a problem I've never had before. The first three days, we were shooting with an anamorphic lens, and I felt that everything was dead. Everything was too cumbersome, was taking way too long. I barely even had time to review the footage. Then I had to make the decision that no filmmaker really wants to make, namely, we had to start over and throw away those first three days of shooting. Even though, factually, we couldn't afford that luxury, we didn't have the budget, we didn't have the time. It caused a bit of a scandal among my crew members. But I called my cinematographer, and told him we'd need to switch to this other camera that I had brought to Armenia, which was much lighter, but not a fancy camera at all. The DoP had brought a backup photo lens, and so, in this mode of manic exploration, we held the lens in front of the camera, it wasn't attached to the camera itself. What I saw gave me a powerful response, it delivered the feeling of what I wanted all along.

CB: Amazing! I was wondering how you achieved this very specific texture of the images.

CH: If you want to bring up photography, it's what Barthes describes as Punctum. It wasn't anything logical. It was just this hyper-subjective intensity of attention that really ignited me and lead to everything else. As much as we were in this state of spontaneity, nothing was random. And within those few days of just getting back on track with this new camera, I realized that this is going to be a much more physical process and that the script itself was pretty much irrelevant. The photography was a contradictory thing: at the edge of seeing, I felt I could see more. There was a lack of information and at the same time, I felt that it opened myself to the essence of things. I could take a photo of anything and feel this life force or libidinal energy. I'd say the challenge in the beginning was rejecting the automatic tendency to want to fall into the plot, into information, and to just push things. You don't need much but whatever is there is more than enough.

CB: I sometimes even got the feeling that the camera is starting the scene before the scene has actually started. It's already active and you feel the intensity of the camera and the optics. But the actors are not yet performing, so the plot is becoming independent from the glance.

CH: I'm happy you feel that because it wasn't a logical thing we were doing. It was a purely illogical, unreasonable, almost anti-intellectual approach that was very important. I wanted the camera to be as dumb as possible, and I don't mean that in a derogatory way. It really goes back to being without pretense. I didn't want to be contrived in any way. It's almost like I fell to earth in Armenia, and this is what I'm seeing for the very first time. It's like going back to The Book of Genesis but stripped of any kind of morality. You need very little, and you need only the immediate outside elements to tell you everything.

GV: I wonder how you navigated the work with your Director of Photography in creating these mesmerizing images?

CH: The communication with Evgeny Rodin, my cinematographer, was really interesting. He's Russian and didn't speak English at first. The crew members were a mix of people, who only spoke one or two of those three languages: Armenian, Russian and English. But after the first scenes, which were the interior scenes that we had thrown away and restarted, it was as if I was speaking the language of the film, word by word. And the longer we kept shooting, the longer I was able to build these words into sentences. Then Evgeny would start to be able to slowly follow these words and understand things through context, through feeling, through body language. It was a very profound and fast relationship. In the choir scene, I just said: „Let's try something else, because it feels too beautiful, too perfect. I'm not in pursuit of this perfection or this beauty, it doesn't interest me." Even Claudette, the main character, looked too virginal, she had almost become a stereotype. I thought we had to push more into the archetypal domain. I was first directing Evgeny, then I directed Veronika [Poghosyan, actor of Claudette, ed.]. The shot that we ended up using in the edit was totally unplanned, but not random. It was a kind of master class of total vulnerability and trust. And I'm grateful that I had a cinematographer who put up with not knowing what we were going to do at any given moment. I would change things on the spot, change lines, cut scenes, combine things and wouldn't even bother communicating it completely. I was real time editing the film and holding the film in my head. It was so good to work with somebody who deeply felt what I was doing and followed me into those realms.

GV: Since you mentioned the actors, there is a very internalized way of how the main actors are present in front of the camera. Were they non-professional actors? How did you work with them?

CH: There was no preparation, none. Veronika Poghosyan, who plays Claudette, has never been in a film before, she's never acted before. But she works in cinema, and I think that was very helpful because she knew how a film set runs. Adam, the actor Davit Beybutyan, has also never starred in a film before. These were their first major roles, let alone in a feature. He had some comedy experience, I found him on Instagram and just called him in. I randomly met Veronika through a person who was working on the set. It was their essence, their presence that immediately spoke to me. That's how I cast. I do work with people who happen to have some professional experience or training, but they are very close to the character and the feeling and the way that they carry themselves.

CB: But how were you able to form their film characters?

CH: From when I told them that they were going to be in the film, we had very little time until we started shooting. And I

wanted them to get familiar with the script and to see if they had any questions. Veronika asked me questions that had a more psychological emphasis. I explicitly replied that I didn't want psychology. It was all about instilling a sense of trust that I wouldn't make them look bad, in reward for them giving me their faces and their beings. I take that very seriously. Because you're not just putting on a costume and playing this role. In many ways, it's an extension of how I project them. To be honest, the most challenging thing, aside from working with the extras, was working with a lot of the trained actors because they wanted to show me certain traits, like the big bad policeman. I said: „No, you don't need to do more." It was about stripping away these ideas of what a corrupt policeman has to be like. I told them to just speak their lines, use their voices, which I liked, and to control the pacing or intonation.

CB: Now I really want to get closer to the content of the film, which to me felt like an experimental opera that digs directly into the state of mind of a society. There are these two people who become a couple, and then emerge into all these couples within the subconscious of Armenian society. But it's also about the function of the family in war. Tell us something about the story that unfolds.

CH: I'll never correct you with your interpretations. It's not my film anymore. Now that it's out and seen by people, I don't want to control or limit the interpretations. I didn't sit down to write a war film, but it has the imprint of war. It occurs in the negative space of war. Because that's just the specific context that I'm working in. I never thought I'd make anything about war. I'm from Los Angeles and I rather approach this as historical material. Whether that's through the actual places that we're shooting in Armenia or real events that have occurred. But I'm arriving at this non-historical truth and I'm more interested in something that a history book cannot express. I want to get to this feeling of history in a broader sense. I'm interested in life and things within history, identity and memory, all that which is part of existence, and really focus on these people and places.

CB: There is the scene showing this huge wedding with a lot of couples, and there is also documentary footage that is showing such a wedding. Is there a connection to something you saw in the news or how did you come up with this idea? I think this gives the film this surrealistic dimension.

CH: The wedding is real. Such a mass wedding took place in Nagorno Karabakh around 2007. In the film, I don't explicitly say that it's Karabakh, but it's still Armenia. This mass wedding came from the need to repopulate Karabakh because so many casualties had occurred during the first war in the 1990s. It was seen as an incentive to get a lot of young people married, give them some money to have kids and revitalize the economy and the development of this place and, naturally, as an extension to build the army. You need soldiers, and where do soldiers come from? But as for the decision to put it in the film: in the very beginning, when I had written it in 2019, it wasn't necessarily meant to show this society at large. I think it was just a real event that spoke to me. The real footage of the wedding wasn't planned, and it was something that I came up with at the last minute when we were with those children watching TV. We were thinking what to put on the TV and then this incredible wedding footage came to my mind. Even if I had wanted to recreate it, you could never surpass reality. I'm aware that those things are there, but I'm making the decision to include them. Obviously, it's a very conscious thing, but I'm not trying to impose any of those ideas. It's just that they exist and are very cyclical.

GV: I want to close our conversation with a question regarding the sound design. It adds very much to this eerie and surrealist quality of your film. Can you talk about the preconception of the sound design you already had and about how much of it you imagined during the shoot and how much was then created in the sound design process?

CH: During the shoot, I asked for a lot of raw sound to be recorded. When we were setting things up for the exterior shots, I'd ask the sound team to get long takes of sounds that you hear in nature. I incorporated a lot of that into the film because I think that's very important. I didn't plan anything. I edited the whole film and was also pretty much doing the first draft of all the sound design. When I sent it to my post production team, the mixers were very happy and said that there was a very clear direction in what I had already put in. It was more about balancing things out, cleaning them and avoiding cinema sound, and making it feel like the sound that exists in real life but also in many ways departing from that.

The cinematic form is really image and sound. It was all about digging into the textures and sensations of the places and being as maximal as possible with the natural world, to the point where it becomes something else. I wanted all those things to really sizzle and even though no one's saying anything, it's loud and you only feel that loudness through the absence of sound, such as in the choir scene when they are gossiping and there's all this movement. It's not a very loud scene. But right when we cut to Adam in the living room, it's like an echo. Only when we see him, it's suddenly very quiet. Playing with this absence and presence was very fun with my team. I'm a real perfectionist and all details, like a bird chirping, come together and create this fabric of reality. What is the sound doing to that image? It's revealing something very internal and invisible.

GV: Thank you so much for your time! I can't wait to see the film in the cinema.