

MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS

My Armenian Phantoms

Regie Tamara Stepanyan

Frankreich, Armenien, Katar | 2025

75 Min. | Armenisch, Russisch mit englischen Untertiteln

Buch Tamara Stepanyan, Jean-Christophe Ferrari.

Montage Olivier Ferrari. **Musik** Cynthia Zaven. **Sound**

Design Jocelyn Robert. **Produzent*innen** Céline Loiseau, Alice Baldo, Tamara Stepanyan. **Executive Producers** Céline Loiseau, Karina Simonyan. **Produktionsfirmen** TS Productions (Paris, Frankreich), Visan (Yerevan, Armenien). **Mit** Vigen Stepanyan.

Weltvertrieb Cinephil

Synopse

Als Kind begegnet Tamara Stepanyan dem armenischen Kino im Fernsehen, im Wohnzimmer mit ihrer Familie. Die Mutter eine virtuose Cellistin, ihr Vater ein ab den 1970er Jahren berühmter Schauspieler: In den Filmen, die Tamara im TV sieht, spielt Vigen Stepanyan oft mit. Ausgehend von dieser ersten verblüffenden Entdeckung erzählt der Film vom Aufwachsen in einer künstlerischen und kritischen Familie in den Jahren des Zerfalls der Sowjetunion. Die Familie emigriert in den Libanon, gewinnt Distanz und leidet unter Sehnsucht; Tamara studiert Regie. Mit ausgesuchten Filmzitaten aus dem Kino-Erbe Armeniens – von Sergei Paradzhanov über Artavazd Peleshyan und weit darüber hinaus – schafft sie eine Annäherung an ihren eigenen Weg als Frau und zum Film. Sie hebt die Erzählung aus dem Privaten heraus und zeigt in der Verbindung von Familienvideos und filmhistorischem Footage die Muster und Eigenarten des weitgehend unbekannten (sowjetisch-)armenischen Kinos. Ihr vierter Langfilm beginnt als *invitation au voyage* an das Publikum und wird schließlich zu einem zärtlich intimen Dialog mit ihrem 2020 verstorbenen Vater: „Erinnerst du dich, Papa?“ Kardiogramm einer Utopie. Eine Geisterbeschwörung. (Gary Vanisian, Barbara Wurm)

Tamara Stepanyan, geboren 1982 in Yerevan. Anfang der 1990er Jahre zogen sie und ihre Eltern in den Libanon und sie studierte später an der National Film School of Denmark. Sie lebt in Frankreich und gilt als eine der neuen Stimmen des zeitgenössischen armenischen Kinos. Ihr Langfilmdebüt EMBERS (2012) wurde beim Busan International Film Festival uraufgeführt. THOSE FROM THE SHORE (2016) und VILLAGE OF WOMEN (2019) nahmen an zahlreichen internationalen Festivals teil und wurden mehrfach ausgezeichnet. Derzeit vollendet sie ihren ersten, in Armenien gedrehten Spielfilm SAVE THE DEAD.

Filme: 2010: Petites pierres / Little Stones (Kurzfilm). 2011: 19 février / 19th of February. 2012: Embers. 2016: Ceux du rivage / Those From the Shore. 2019: Village des femmes / Village of Women. 2025: Mes fantômes arméniens / My Armenian Phantoms.

Kommentar der Regisseurin

Dialog mit dem Geist meines Vaters

Eine persönliche filmische Reise durch die Geschichte des armenischen Kinos

Am 19. Januar 2020 verlor ich meinen Vater, Vigen Stepanyan, plötzlich und auf brutale Weise.

Mein Vater war Schauspieler, sowohl am Theater als auch im Film.

Der Schmerz, den der Tod eines Vaters verursacht, ist unvorstellbar und unmöglich zu beschreiben. Deshalb werde ich es nicht versuchen. Was ich weiß und was ich sagen kann, ist, dass die Trauer über seinen Tod umso intensiver war, da ich glaubte, dass wir noch viel Zeit zum Reden hätten. Nun ist unser Dialog für immer unterbrochen.

MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS (MY ARMENIAN PHANTOMS)

ist aus diesem unterbrochenen Dialog entstanden. Das Verschwinden meines Vaters hat mir die Türen zur Vergangenheit weit geöffnet. Zur armenischen Vergangenheit. Und zur Vergangenheit des Kinos. Die beiden sind eng miteinander verbunden.

Als ich anfang, mit seinem Geist in einen Dialog zu treten, als ich anfang, nach Spuren seiner früheren Karriere zu suchen und sie zu sammeln, als ich anfang, die Filme, in denen er mitspielte, erneut anzusehen, stieß ich auf andere Geister aus der Geschichte des armenischen Kinos. Es war, als hätte der Geist meines Vaters mich an die Hand genommen und mich in einen Kreis von Geistern geführt, die alle auf die eine oder andere Weise mit der Welt des Kinos verbunden sind. Daher der Wunsch, die Geschichte dieses im Ausland wenig bekannten Kinos in einem Film zu erzählen, um eine persönliche filmische Reise durch die Geschichte des armenischen Kinos darzubringen.

Ein Kino, das ganz natürlich mit einem politischen, sozialen und kulturellen Universum verbunden ist, das es heute nicht mehr gibt: die Sowjetunion. In der Tat ist das armenische Kino eng mit der Geschichte des Sowjetimperiums verbunden. Es begann 1925 mit NAMOUS (HONOR, Regie: Hamo Bek-Nazarov) und wurde nach den Dreharbeiten zu KAROT (NOS-TALGIA, Regie: Frunze Dovlatian, 1990) für mehr als zehn Jahre unterbrochen, als die UdSSR aufgelöst wurde und Armenien nach 70 Jahren wieder zu einer unabhängigen Nation wurde. Eine unabhängige Nation, ja... aber eine, die sich nach ihrer sowjetischen Vergangenheit sehnt. So sehr, dass sie es schwer hat, ihre Geschichte in der Gegenwart zu schreiben.

Ich wurde 1982 geboren und bin selbst ein Kind der Sowjetunion. In der Schule lernte ich Russisch und kommunistische Werte. Bei den Pfadfindern war es meine leidenschaftliche Ambition, ein „Pionier“ zu werden (gemäß der sowjetischen Terminologie, die die Pfadfindergruppen strukturierte und hierarchisierte). Als die UdSSR aufgelöst wurde, war ich schrecklich frustriert, als mir klar wurde, dass ich niemals ... „ein Pionier“ sein würde! Wie viele Kinder in Osteuropa und Eurasien, die sowohl die Sowjetunion als auch ihre Nachwirkungen erlebt haben, hegte

ich ambivalente Gefühle gegenüber dem kommunistischen System: eine Mischung aus Ablehnung und versteckter, fast beschämender Bewunderung.

Als die UdSSR zusammenbrach und Armenien unabhängig wurde, verließen meine Eltern das Land. Sie kehrten zurück, um dort zu leben. Ich tat es nicht. Seitdem habe ich mein ganzes Leben im Ausland verbracht.

Tamara Stepanyan

Interview

“I knew from the beginning that I wanted the personal story to be linked to the bigger story”

Tamara Stepanyan speaks with Gary Vanisian and Barbara Wurm about exploring and passing on the heritage of Armenian cinema

DAS GESPRÄCH WURDE AUF ENGLISCH GEFÜHRT.

*Barbara Wurm: Tamara, thank you for **MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS**, your tender dialogue with your dead father as well as with the film history of Soviet Armenia.*

*Gary Vanisian: I thought about the last time an Armenian film had been invited to the Berlinale. In 2021, there was the film **BLACK BACH ARTSAKH** in Forum Expanded, but technically it's not an Armenian film. Neither are Atom Egoyan's films, except **CALENDAR**, which was in Forum in 1994. From then on, his films were not Armenian productions.*

Tamara Stepanyan: We were looking into it and I think the last time that an Armenian film was at the Berlinale was the film by Mikhail 'Mika' Dovlatyan, it was in 1995. He made a quite experimental and interesting film called **LABYRINTH**. It was in Forum in 1995. It's been 30 years, and now we are back with two Armenian films, both directed by women: **AFTER DREAMING** by Christine Haroutounian and mine. This is historical.

*BW: When did you begin conceiving **MES FANTÔMES ARMÉNIENS**?*

TS: Four years ago, when I lost my father. I think the trigger was this loss and this kind of re-establishment of a dialogue with a person who is not there anymore and with whom I was not only father and daughter, but also colleagues. He was a scriptwriter, too. He would consult me about his writing, I would consult him with mine. Then, the artistic dialogue and the father/daughter dialogue was cut. I said to myself: 'It's not possible, I need to re-establish something.' This was when I started looking into his films, his videos, personal home movies. I said to myself that I must make something out of it. It was four years ago, and I started to dig into the material. I knew from the beginning that I wanted the personal story to be linked to the bigger story. I didn't want it to become just the father/daughter dialogue. I wanted this dialogue to open into a much more collective story because I love how the personal and the collective are intertwined. Getting into the collective story, I started looking into all these amazing Armenian films. I asked around in Armenia how I could have access to all these films. I was told that there's a YouTube channel where you can watch many Armenian films for free, without subtitles though. It was my database. I went on looking, film by film, taking notes and noting down time codes. For the films I could not find on the channel, I contacted the National Cinema Center of Armenia, and that is when the former director, Shushanik Mirzakhanyan, said: 'Come and watch whatever you want.' Everyone there was very excited that I was making a film about this part of Armenian cinema. They gave me access to all I wanted. It took quite some time to watch all the many films, including short

films, documentaries, chronicles. My friend Vigen Galstyan became my consultant at this point, which was very helpful and gave me a lot of inside stories and expertise. The project started four years ago, but it took time to grow in me because something so personal is very difficult to let out. I started intertwining the personal, the historical, the political. I think it's a very political film about Soviet rule, about the era of Stalin, the repressions, censorship and how Armenian cinema started to exist amidst the censorship.

BW: If you think back to the conversations and dialogues with your parents, how important was the topic of Soviet Armenian cinema in your family's memory?

TS: It was very important. My grandparents worked in the cinema and everybody was so implicated. I remember my grandfather, my mother's father, dubbed films: Armenian films in Russian, Russian films in Armenian. He was the dubbing director for Hamo Bek-Nazarian's later historical films, and an assistant director on them. This old Armenian cinema encompassed your whole life. There is a building in my film, which is very phantomatic when I enter its corridors. It was so full of life, like a second home to them, a city within a city. They spent much more time there than at home. All the intimate jokes, the inside stories, funny, tragic, love stories – everybody was living this life like a parallel life. Within my family it was very important because my grandparents on my mother's side worked a lot in our apartment and my mother and father talked a lot, sharing thoughts and ideas. Watching these films is like dealing with my heritage. What I think I try to do unconsciously with this film is to transmit this heritage to the younger generation, to my children. I felt it was so important to watch these films as a child, to discuss them, to know all the songs and sometimes the dialogue by heart. But today's young generation knows very little about this cinema. If you ask young Armenians today, they'll say it's shitty cinema because it's full of Soviet ideology. But then my idea is to look at what is behind all this, to push further.

GV: Was it also a habit in your home to watch the films starring your father?

TS: I was very proud of him as a child, my mother was very proud, whereas my father was always joking about it: 'Oh, it's nothing, you know, it's a small film.' But I think he was also proud. And since my father acted mostly in comedies, we used to laugh a lot, even more since these were films accessible to children. For example, he acted in a film, which I didn't use in this movie, a children's film, a musical comedy, in which he plays a cat. It's so funny, he's the only cat and he has a lot of mice around him, which are girls, of course. As a child, it was one of my favourite films. When I showed it to my children, they said: 'That's grandfather? It's not possible!' It was one of his first films. Furthermore, my father was quite a figure: When he was walking in the street, people would often stop him and ask if they could take a picture or get an autograph. Growing up with this kind of father, you highly appreciate it. But he was modest, he was not a show-off.

GV: Did this reception of Armenian cinema, of Soviet Armenian cinema continue when you moved to Beirut?

TS: In Beirut, we didn't have access to this kind of film. The Internet didn't yet exist, and we only had Lebanese TV in Arabic which we didn't even understand, thus we didn't use it at all. When we arrived in Beirut, it was 1994, shortly after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, and it were very difficult times in Armenia. We were in a precarious economic state. We had a very simple life, let's put it that way. We always watched these films a little bit when we'd go in the summer to Armenia, but there was a kind of distance. Though, when you are distanced to something and later go back to it, it hits you even stronger. It was when I had started film school in Lebanon at 18 that I discovered Artavazd Pelechian and Sergej Parajanov. I was very impressed, but at the

same time a bit angry with my parents. I said: 'But why did you never show me Parajanov and Pelechian?' To which my parents said that I was not mature enough for that kind of cinema. As an adult, I discovered Frunze Dovlatyan and others. Indeed, his film BAREV, YES EM (Hello, That's Me, 1966) wasn't a film you'd watch at home with your kids. Henrik Malyan, on the other hand, was a very popular filmmaker. I watched his films as a child. All the films you see in my movie are the films I watched as a kid and to which I came back when I was adult. This gap makes a difference. As a child, you perceive in a totally different way than as an adult. And then again, I revisited the films again four years ago when I was 38. Imagine you know something, and you go back to it three times! The first time as an emotional child. The second time as a film school student: You want to watch everything, you want to understand. And then the third time you approach it intellectually. It's interesting how these three times intertwine and cross each other. I have this memory: 'Ah yes, when I watch this movie, this is how I understood it then, and then today I understand it differently.' I analyse differently, but the emotion is still the one of the child.

BW: I think it's a strong quality of your film that you don't deny this intertwining of the times, memory and sentiment. It's sensitive and delicate in combining the private or intimate with a bigger picture. You describe it with the words 'ghostly' or 'imaginary', but in watching your film, I also had the feeling that at some point it's even close to a kind of self-analysis. It seems to be a therapeutic film, or at least a film that amongst other things explains how your becoming a filmmaker is connected with this revision of your life.

TS: It's so interesting what you say. It was very difficult to go into myself very deep, to dig it out, to bring it out, to put it there. I think it's my most personal film. I still remember, as a young woman, when I came to tell my parents that I want to make films, and they both looked at me: 'Are you sure you really want to enter into this world of men?' When I was about to study in the early 2000s, in Armenia there were no women directors at all. I think only a few of us dared to say: 'Yes, I want to do this.' EMBERS (2013) was my first film, and I had difficulties making it. I had zero money, it was a fight to do what I wanted. It was against all odds. And I'm more than thankful to my parents for supporting me, even if they were surprised in the beginning. Others supported me, too. Maria Saakyan for instance. She died young and made three fiction films, above all the beautiful film MAYAK (Lighthouse, 2006). Masha was two years older than me. She gave me so much faith. I remember once we had breakfast together at a film festival where I presented my short fiction film. She said: 'Don't be afraid! There are lots of closed doors. You must break them. You must cross paths. This is what I'm doing. And you must come and help me. We're going to do it together!' We became friends, and then, when she passed away, I realised that this girl had fought so hard. Now, when I look around and see all these young Armenian filmmakers, I feel happy. I feel that maybe I had a little part in helping them to open these closed doors. And it makes me happy that I came this far and now am featured at the Berlinale where before, as we said, all the Armenian films were made by men. I feel happy, emotional and, in a way, proud, because it seems that this fight was not in vain.

GV: What were the first steps in the making of this film? Did you start writing the narration or instead assembling the clips you wanted to include?

TS: First, I started writing and taking notes. I watched films. And every time I watched a film, I tried to understand the themes that were inspiring me. Normally, you do research first and then you go and watch the films. I did the reverse. I let the films inspire me. Then I went into research, studying archives, talking to Vigen. Only then did I write the treatment. For my previous film, VILLAGE DES FEMMES (Village of Women, 2019), I shot half of the film and then I wrote the treatment. But this time, I asked

my husband Jean-Christophe Ferrari, who is my collaborator and co-writer. We started to write and structure everything I had done before.

BW: When you chose the clips for rebuilding your own cinematic canon, by what principles did you choose them?

TS: I followed my instincts a lot. I do this often. This is what helped me to then intellectualise and put it on paper. For example, I knew that I wanted to talk about women. I knew that I wanted to talk about repression, Stalin's hand on the studio. I knew that I wanted to talk about my family history and the link it had with cinema. I knew I wanted to talk about the cinema being a men's world. I had the big themes in my head already and put them down on paper. Every time I'd go watch these films and I felt strongly about a scene, I'd say: 'This scene has to be in the film, and it's part of this or that theme.' But there was a lot of instinct and emotion that was in dialogue with my intellect. In the beginning, I was also thinking about making a chapter-based film, several short films in a big film. We even started the editing that way: a chapter on women, a chapter on repression, etc. But quite soon, I understood that this would become very boring and repetitive. Eventually, we broke this structure and we started the intertwining.

GV: I had the impression that there are fewer clips of films with your father than of other films made in Armenia. Did you at some point have more footage from your father's films?

TS: My father started his acting career in the 1980s and he acted a lot in TV films, to which we didn't have access, and in his cinema career, he did not make so many films since it ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. My favourite films are the films that were done way before he became an actor, films from the 1960s and 1970s, and all these actors that you see in my film worked with my father – just not in cinema, but in theatre. I knew them all, they were like the big brothers of my father. They came to our house and our parties. My father started to act in films around the time when I was born, in 1982, when he was 30. One of the most beautiful films he ever acted in is a film by David Safarian, 28:94 LOCAL TIME (2015). Safarian made it over ten years. He shot it on 35mm. It was a German co-production. He is a very good director, and for me, it's one of the films that speaks the most to my heart. This is when I realised that I wanted to create a dialogue with my father, but not when he was younger. For me, this film is one of the most important films made after Armenian independence.

GV: Your father passed away in 2020, which was also the year when the horrible, gruesome Azeri attack on Artsakh happened. And then in 2023, when the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh occurred, did this perilous situation impact your film?

TS: My fiction film, which I'm editing now and that I shot this past summer, will be precisely about Artsakh. My father died just two months after the end of the 2020 war. My father's parents were from Artsakh, from Shushi. It was a horrible war in which 7,000 young men between the ages of 18 and 21 lost their lives. Every day, my father would call and say: 'I can't believe that all these children died, that we lost so much land and here I am unable to do anything.' He would even say: 'I don't care about the land. I care about these kids that died, this whole generation.' It was his obsession in the end. He was not into theatre or anything anymore, but into politics. He went on the streets, took part in protests, and tried to raise the question about what was happening. I think my father died because we lost the war and youth lost their lives. He just fell asleep... forever. A lot of people died from this war. And I think an unconscious influence to start this dialogue was to understand: When such a big death comes, do we want to go back? Do we want to understand the past? I think it's important to understand it after this war. The Artsakh war has a direct impact on all of Armenians. I think unconsciously it fuelled my desire to go back to the past, to keep

the heritage alive, to keep what we have, and to talk about what we are afraid to lose.

GV: Now, after so many years of pondering and reflecting on Armenian films, what if anything do you think is special about Armenian Soviet cinema? Is there a certain element or feature which you think makes Armenian cinema stand from other cinemas?

TS: What is unique for me is the way it treats nostalgia. The way it treats this longing for return and the way it treats loss. There's always the motive of a return despite loss and sadness. Surely, it's for historical reasons, because of the genocide in the Ottoman Empire, because of the later wars, that Armenians have this talent to film nostalgia, to film desire, this state of living in the past. I also think that there's an Armenian quality to create, to make films despite state control, despite censorship, amid all these difficulties. It takes a lot of intelligence and talent to insert these drops of resistance in a film. But I think the nostalgia and the depiction of the motive of return are its greatest virtues.