

Critics' Forum
Film and Music
The Genocide in Who?
By Tamar Salibian

In "The Genocide in Me" (2005), Araz Artinian tells her story of being a Canadian-Armenian dealing with her father's national obsession and struggling with her own identity, while also recounting the atrocities of the Armenian Genocide and its repercussions. Part historical document, part travelogue and part family portrait, the film presents the Armenian Genocide not only as a horrific tragedy but as an eternal burden that the filmmaker carries in her personal life. Artinian begins the film with an important and very difficult question: how can she learn to understand her father's national obsession when her own perspective is so different from his? The film takes important steps to try to answer this and other questions.

The film begins with Artinian visiting a memorial site while, in a voiceover, she presents her main argument. Artinian states that, for her, being Armenian was always "much more than being myself," and that now, because of the Armenian Genocide, everything to do with her life, her happiness and her future, "goes back to 1915." Family footage shows the filmmaker as a young child playing on the beach, and with a close-up still frame resembling one from Francois Truffaut's "400 Blows," the film begins its journey.

Artinian's parents were immigrants from Egypt who settled in Canada. Araz's father, Vrej Armen (which stands for "the revenge of the Armenians") is an activist in Montreal who was one of the founding members of the local Sourp Hagop School. Artinian explains how her grandmother's intense patriotism and pressure on her father led him to his activism and his political cause. Vrej Armen's cause is that of Genocide recognition, and he has influenced many lives with his community work. His influence on his own daughter, however, is more complex. "I've been carrying the weight of Turkey's denial in my schoolbag since my childhood," Araz recounts as she worries about visiting her parents. "'Asdvadz hedus,' which means 'may God be with me'" she tells the camera before entering her parents' home to have dinner and talk.

The film presents a splendidly interwoven mix of archival and recent footage showing Artinian as a child, a young woman and an adult. In the dinner scene, the editing masterfully combines old footage of the family at their dining room table with newer footage of Artinian asking her parents questions. The young Araz is a playful girl who sings and dances while the older, present-day Araz searches for answers from her family. The old footage shows the family affirming their Armenian language and customs so that Araz and her sister will learn them as well. The filmmaker presents these affirmations as pressure passed on from generation to generation resulting in resentment towards her culture. "I always had a love-hate relationship with my language," Araz notes; yet she strives to understand the layers of her culture.

Artinian wishes to understand her father's national obsession, his connection to the past, and the repercussions that the Genocide had on the Armenian people. She wonders,

“How can I connect with something I had never seen before?” and soon embarks on a trip to Turkey to visit historic Armenian sites. On the trip, she encounters a Turkish tour guide who denies the major events of the Genocide. She meets an American traveler who questions such denials. And she spends time with a young Turkish man of Armenian descent who recounts his grandmother’s stories of being rescued from the Genocide by a Turkish man who later became her husband. This trip proves to be fruitful to the viewer, as we are able to notice what has happened in Turkey over decades after the Genocide. Yet the viewer also feels that Artinian often skims the surface of her personal questions of identity. She asks, “Where do I belong? Do I belong in Armenia, in Canada or in Turkey?” but does not answer the question.

While Artinian states, “I set aside my personal life” to understand her father’s national obsession, the study of this obsession becomes sideswiped during the film by Artinian’s own personal obsession with intermarriage, a question which is never fully explored. The loose connection between the study of Armenian history and the question of love and intermarriage becomes no more than melodrama, as the film is unable to suggest, ultimately, how one affects the other. Artinian argues at her parents’ dinner table that intermarriage does not always have a negative effect on the continuation of Armenian culture, and her mother responds, “That’s not the problem right now. The problem is that we have a huge cause ahead of us, and that is the recognition of the Genocide.” Araz refuses to hear or understand her mother’s important statement and quickly reminds her family that the intermarriage question is the important one for her. Herein, unfortunately, lies the film’s biggest problem. Artinian attempts to present a complex study of her father, of Armenian history and of the effects of genocide. Yet in the final moments of the film, she returns to her question of intermarriage, telling the viewer, “In spite of the Genocide, I want to be Armenian and free.” It is an unfortunate ending for a film that asks so many important questions, ones that perhaps cannot be answered in one film.

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