

MY ARMENIAN PHANTOMS

A FILM BY TAMARA STEPANYAN

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TS PRODUCTIONS

present



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A FILM BY **TAMARA STEPANYAN**

Nationality : French-Armenian
Duration : 75 minutes
Languages : English, Armenian

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SYNOPSIS

In *My Armenian Phantoms*, filmmaker Tamara Stepanyan embarks on an evocative journey through the forgotten world of Armenian cinema. Sparked by a dialogue with her father, renowned Armenian actor Vigen Stepanyan, this captivating documentary brings to life the vibrant and often overlooked history interwoven with personal loss. Drawing on a rich tapestry of archival footage and her own memories, *My Armenian Phantoms* reveals a profound cultural and artistic legacy to new audiences. The film explores the creative spirit behind films that spoke to universal themes of identity, love, struggle, and artistic expression - a cinematic tradition that produced some of the most visually striking and thematically powerful films of its era. It captures not just Soviet Armenian cinema, but the enduring soul of Armenian storytelling - its beauty, its struggles, and its unyielding spirit.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

On January 19, 2020, I lost my father, Vigen Stepanyan, suddenly and brutally. My father was an actor, both in theater and film. He was very popular in Armenia: you could recognize him in the street, and his funeral was attended by political figures, personalities from the art world with whom he had collaborated, and many anonymous people who came to pay their respects. He is buried in the Tokhmakh Pantheon, the Armenian Pantheon.

The pain caused by the death of a father is unthinkable and impossible to describe. So I won't attempt it. What I do know, and what I can tell, is that the grief caused by his death was all the more intense because I imagined that we still had plenty of time to talk. I liked to imagine our future conversations, in which I would talk to him about my film projects and he, in turn, would tell me about his life as an actor, with all its ups and downs and anecdotes, some funny (even truculent), others more serious. I'd even advised him to write his memoirs... Now our dialogue is broken forever. My father will never write his memoirs...

My Armenian Phantoms was born of this interrupted dialogue, of these unwritten memories. How my father's disappearance opened the doors of the past wide for me. The Armenian past. And the past of cinema. Both intimately linked. As I began to dialogue with his ghost, as I began to search for and collect traces of his past career, as I began to revisit the films he starred in, I came across other ghosts from the history of Armenian cinema. It was as if my father's ghost had taken me by the hand and led me into a circle of ghosts linked, in one way or another, to the world of cinema. Hence the desire to tell the story of this cinema, little known abroad, in a film. To offer a personal cinematic journey through the history of Armenian cinema. A cinema organically linked to a political, social and cultural universe that has now disappeared: the Soviet Union. Armenian cinema is closely linked to the history of the Soviet empire. It began in 1925 with *Namous*, (Honor, Hamo Bek-Nazarov) and was interrupted for over ten years after the filming of *Karot* (Nostalgia, Frunze Dovlatian, 1990), when the USSR was dismantled and Armenia, after 70 years, once again became an independent nation. An independent nation, to be sure...but in part nostalgic for its Soviet past. To the point of having difficulty writing its history in the present.



Born in 1982, I am a child of the Soviet Union. At school, I was taught Russian and Communist values. In the scouts, I passionately aspired to be a “pioneer” (according to the Soviet terminology that structured and hierarchized scout clans) and, when the USSR was dismantled, I felt an intense frustration when I realized that I would never be... “a pioneer”! Like many children in Eastern Europe and Eurasia who experienced both the Soviet Union and its aftermath, I harbored ambivalent feelings towards the Communist system: a mixture of rejection and hidden, almost shameful admiration.

When the USSR collapsed and Armenia became independent, my parents left Armenia. They returned to live there. I did not. I've lived abroad all my life. So I only fully lived in Armenia when it was Soviet. And not since it became independent. Hence the question, the tension: what exactly does “being Armenian” mean to me? How can I be Armenian after the Soviet era?

This tension also runs through the history of Armenian cinema, since it was during the Soviet era that Armenian cinema experienced its golden age. It was during this period of tutelage that Armenian cinema found its cinematic identity. In this respect, the history of Soviet Armenian cinema bears witness to the difficulty Armenia faced in asserting its identity after the genocide. It casts a complex and indecisive light on the question of what it means to be Armenian.

Above all, the nostalgia felt by some Armenians for Soviet Armenia runs through my own life. I felt it keenly when the economic crisis following the collapse of the USSR forced my family into exile in Lebanon, when I was twelve years old. A nostalgia that the death of my father, who spoke and wrote Russian so well, rekindled and revitalized.

In *My Armenian Phantoms*, I return to the Armenian cinema of the Soviet period (1923-1990) with a sense of loss and disappearance that I'm determined to explore in both its intimate and collective dimensions. For me, *My Armenian Phantoms* is an extension of *Embers*, my first feature-length documentary, the two films complementing each other to form a diptych.

I shot *Embers* in 2006. When my grandmother Tamara died, I met her friends, with whom she had fought in the Second World War and with whom she shared the communist ideal. Tamara and her friends celebrated Victory Day every year on May 9 (as in the whole Soviet empire, instead of May 8 as in Europe). As a child, I was fascinated by their songs and speeches. In *Embers*, I have collected the last memories of men and women who fought for a cause, a lost ideology, the last Mohicans of a vanished time of which only shadows remain.

A film full of shadows and melancholy, *My Armenian Phantoms* is not a historical or educational film about the history of Soviet Armenian cinema. It is not a film that claims to determine its value and place in the history of world cinema. Rather, it is a testimony to the way in which, through my personal history and my destiny as a filmmaker, I am rediscovering this cinema today, with its faces, its landscapes, its actors, its stories, its themes, its visual motifs, its unspoken words, its constraints.



My Armenian Phantoms is a film about my dialogue with the ghosts of Armenian cinema, following the free and subjective path of my memories, emotions and thoughts. A film in which I try to capture the traces, the embers, the few glimmers of light that continue, despite everything, to shine.

And all the more so as Soviet Armenian cinema has traveled very little and remains, despite the treasures it contains, known exclusively to the Armenian public. Proof of this is the astonishing and significant fact that abroad, cinephiles remember only two names in the history of Armenian cinema: Pelechian and Paradjanov, precisely two filmmakers who worked on the bangs of the Soviet production system.

LIST OF INCLUDED ARMENIAN MOVIES

Hamo Bek-Nazaryan

Namous - 1925

Zareh - 1926

Pepo - 1935

Zanguezour - 1938

Frounze Dovlatyan

Hello it's me - 1966

Birth Pangs - 1976

The Lonely Nut-Tree - 1986

Nostalgie - 1990

Henrik Malyan

Triangle - 1967

We and our Mountains - 1969

Nahapet - 1977

A Piece of Sky - 1980

Sergei Parajanov

The Color of Pomegranates - 1969

Bagrat Hovhannessian

Sour Grape - 1973

Autumn Sun - 1977

Grigori Meliq-Avagyan, Yervand**Tsaturyan**

What's the River Noise About? - 1958

Yuriy Erznkyan et Laert Vagharshyan

The Song of First Love - 1958

Arnold Aghababov

Garni - 1966

Edmond Keosayan

The Men - 1972

Khoren Abrahamyan, Arkadi**Hayrapetyan**

Saroyan Brothers - 1969

Dmitri Kesayants

The procession of our grandfathers -
1981

Catastrophe - 1993

Ruben Gevorgyants

White Bone - 1988

Gennadi Melkonyan

The Last Sunday - 1985

Dmitri Kesayants, Gennadi Melkonyan,**Aghasi Ayvazyan**

Three of us - 1987

Edgar Baghdasaryan

Games - 1990

David Safaryan

29:94. Local Time - 2015

Tamara Stepanyan

Embers - 2012

The Last station - 2005

UNIT LIST

Director	Tamara Stepanyan
Script writers	Tamara Stepanyan, Jean-Christophe Ferrari
Producers Associated producers	Céline Loiseau, Alice Baldo, Tamara Stepanyan Miléna Poylo & Gilles Sacuto
Film Heritage consultant	Vigen Galstyan
Assistant director Cinematographer Editor	Ophelia Azizyan Claire Mathon Olivier Ferrari
Sound designer Color grader	Jocelyn Robert Graziella Zanoni
Line Producers	Céline Loiseau, Karina Simonyan
Composer	Cynthia Zaven
World Sales	Shoshi Korman & Suzanne Nodale

