

VISUALIZING MEMORY AND LOSS: FRENCH-ARMENIAN DOCUMENTARY RESPONSES TO THE GENOCIDE

Film Review

Armenians, The Hidden Grandmothers, dir. Alexandra Routhiau Mikaélian. France, 2024. 52 min; *Ojakh: On the Other Side of the Silence*, dir. Diana Mkrtchyan. France/Armenia, 2024. 95 min.; *Alone*, dir. Hakob Melkonyan and Gaëlle Hamalian-Testud. France/Armenia, 2024. 94 min.

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How should the legacy of genocide be represented in film? How can filmmakers convey the gravity of historical trauma while working with limited production resources? Three notable French-Armenian documentary films addressing the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide were featured at the 2025 Golden Apricot International Film Festival. More than a century after the events, each offers a distinct cinematic approach to engaging with the enduring legacy of the Armenian Genocide.

In *Armenians, The Hidden Grandmothers*, Alexandra Routhiau Mikaélian explores a personal family history shaped by the genocide. Her Armenian grandmother, before emigrating to France in the post-genocide years, left behind her first child in a Turkish family, creating two family branches that remained unaware of one another for generations. The documentary follows the rediscovery of these long-lost relatives in contemporary Turkey.

The film seeks to confront inherited silence and foster dialogue and reconciliation. That such silences persist 110 years after the genocide—despite a substantial body of memoirs, scholarship, and artistic representations—is itself revealing. At times, these silences rupture unexpectedly. One particularly striking moment occurs when a Turkish man (oddly looking like Serj Tankian), confronted with the family revelations, asks: “Are we Armenians, then?”

This intimate approach possesses both strengths and limitations. On the one hand, the documentary conveys genuine human warmth and illustrates the possibility of interpersonal openness and recognition among some Turks. On the other hand, its intensely personal lens risks reducing the scale and structural nature of genocide to a matter of individual family trauma and private misfortunes.

Although Mikaélian gestures toward broader historical realities, notably the absence of Armenians from formerly Armenian quarters, the narrative remains centered on family connections and the experiences of Armenian girls who were absorbed into Turkish households and later become “silent grandmothers.” This thematic focus is reinforced by

the inclusion of Fethiye Çetin, whose influential memoir *Anneannem* (My Grandmother, 2004) contributed to bringing the issue of hidden Armenian ancestry into Turkish public discourse.

The result is a warm and humane exploration of the genocide's afterlives. Families are reunited, difficult conversations begin, and some measure of reconciliation becomes imaginable. Yet more challenging political and historical questions remain largely outside the frame. By localizing catastrophe within the microcosm of family history, the film renders an otherwise overwhelming historical trauma manageable. In this sense, it stands apart within the genre of genocide documentaries: something tangible is indeed achieved—the families are reunited, individuals find one another.

A more ambitious and philosophically layered work, *Ojakh: On the Other Side of the Silence*, was screened on the opening day of the festival. Directed by Diana Mkrtchyan, the film emerged from a decade-long project involving multiple rounds of interviews conducted in Armenian border communities. Distinguished by psychological depth, philosophical reflection, and striking visual poetics, the documentary stands apart from more conventional historical documentaries.

At the center of the film is Erhan Arik, a Turkish photographer born in 1984 in Ardahan, northeastern Turkey, in a house that had belonged to Armenians before 1915. Interestingly, his journey was catalyzed by a dream in which a male voice asked why he had turned the room where his wife once baked bread and his children played into a barn. Disturbed by the experience, Arik embarked on a search to understand the meaning of this haunting voice.

Arik's search led him to Armenia, where he photographed descendants of genocide survivors and recorded their testimonies. During an exhibition of his photographs and stories in France, he encountered Diana Mkrtchyan, who initiated the collaboration that ultimately resulted in this documentary. The project spanned nearly ten years, with the earliest layers of the film consisting of material from Arik's initial trip. Remarkably, he was able to interview a 105-year-old survivor from Kars, one of the last remaining witnesses. The film follows Arik's travels through Armenian border villages and Gyumri, where he encounters descendants of Armenians forcibly displaced from Kars, Nakhichevan, and other lost homelands, some now located just across the border (e.g., Bagaran).

What most distinguishes the documentary is Arik's reflective voice. His meditations on historical destruction, absence, memory, and inherited responsibility introduce a philosophical dimension rarely sustained in genocide documentaries. Whereas many such works rely primarily on factual testimony and historical reconstruction, *Ojakh* creates space for introspection and existential engagement. Arik's voice is marked by philosophical insight and poetic sensitivity, elevating the work as a whole. Ultimately, his journey culminates not merely in discovering Armenian voices, but in internalizing them. The haunting voice he seeks becomes part of his own moral consciousness. Thus, Arik does indeed find the Armenian voice—within himself, as he ultimately becomes that voice.

Diana Mkrtchyan successfully weaves together interviews, landscapes, memory, and reflection into a coherent cinematic whole. The film affirms that even in 110 years, the

relevance and significance of the genocide have not diminished. The film's emotional power is reinforced by survivor testimony. As one descendant in Gyumri declares: "The genocide will not be forgotten in 100 or 500 years; it is our fate, our burden. Wounds heal, not the pain."

Ojakh has already received international recognition, including the Best Documentary Feature award at the International Women's Film Festival in New York (2024). Nevertheless, it was given surprisingly limited prominence in the Yerevan festival's program.

The third French-Armenian documentary, *Alone*, takes a markedly different approach. It follows a photographer who travels from France to Armenia in search of her Armenian roots, beginning with sites where her grandfather may have lived as an orphan in the aftermath of the genocide. Her journey leads her to Gyumri, where she encounters a children's home housed in a building that once sheltered Armenian orphans.

Unexpectedly, however, the historical quest gradually recedes as the film shifts its focus toward the daily lives of contemporary boys residing in the orphanage. This narrative transition remains largely unexplained, resulting in a documentary whose structure appears diffuse and uncertain. In the absence of a clear storyline, the film loosely documents the everyday events of the children's lives.

However, the film avoids drifting into monotony thanks to the compelling presence of one particular child, Artur, whose natural charisma and expressive face captivate the viewer. Remarkably mature for his age, he lends the film much of its emotional weight. His maturity, expressive presence, and emotional authenticity provide the documentary with its affective force and narrative coherence.

Rather than directly addressing the genocide, the film unfolds within the context of contemporary Armenian crises, most notably the recent ethnic cleansing of Artsakh, which hovers somewhere in the background. The genocide of 1915 is left unspoken, yet its shadow persists indirectly through shades of absence, displacement, and inherited fragmentation.

At first glance, the film may appear narratively elusive or emotionally attenuated. Upon reflection, however, this apparent emptiness proves meaningful. What *Alone* ultimately captures is the post-genocidal condition of historical absence and the force of oblivion: the loss of stories, voices, and records beyond recovery. The protagonist's inability to reconstruct her grandfather's past mirrors the viewer's own encounter with this historical void. Whether intentional or not, the film conveys the epistemic and existential impasse inherent in engaging an inaccessible past. What befell the grandfather before or during his time in the orphanage cannot be retrieved—there is no one left to tell the story, no records to consult, nothing to reconstruct. The viewer, like the protagonist, is thus positioned as a passive witness to absence, confined to the flow of the present, unable to grasp the missing past.

Taken together, these three French-Armenian documentaries demonstrate how temporal distance shapes cinematic engagement with genocide. Each approaches the Armenian Genocide not as immediate trauma, but as inherited memory, historical absence, or an unresolved post-genocidal afterlife.

Curiously, all three French-Armenian films were relegated to a minor venue and

screened only once at the Golden Apricot festival. For the first two films, even basic information was lacking in the official programme. From a foreign visitor's perspective, this marginalization of the films within Armenia itself appears both baffling and regrettable.

The festival also featured several documentaries and short films addressing the recent ethnic cleansing of Artsakh. In this case, it is precisely the lack of temporal distance that makes the task difficult. Most of the films focused on personal stories of displacement and loss. While emotionally compelling, they offered little contextualization of Artsakh's historical, cultural, religious, and symbolic significance. When such a profound collective and historical catastrophe is reduced to individualized narratives of suffering, it can easily give outsiders the impression that the catastrophe is little more than a private disaster – akin to any event that forces individuals to flee their homes. It remains the task of future films to convey the historical, cultural, and religious distinctiveness of Artsakh, its deeper significance, its now-lost unique atmosphere, not to mention its symbolic value for Armenian identity as a rare case of national victory.

Yet such silence is understandable, even inevitable. The trauma of Artsakh remains immediate and unresolved: communities continue to endure shock, grief, and displacement, while a broader collective state of shock appears to prevail in Armenia, manifesting in varied responses. Considerable time will be required before the full significance of this loss can be absorbed, let alone artistically articulated. In this sense, the limited perspective is hardly surprising. Moreover, the accumulation of national tragedies overburdens the psychological and cultural capacity to process them.

Yet there was one notable exception – Christine Haroutounian's debut feature *After Dreaming* (2025), a visually sophisticated and emotionally resonant response to the tragedy of Artsakh and its place within the Armenian collective psyche. Structured as a road movie that gradually transforms into a dreamlike communal wedding feast, evocative of the famous mass wedding in Shushi, the film succeeds in captivating its audience, particularly those attuned to Armenian cultural memory. It culminates in a striking symbolic sequence in which celebratory fireworks morph into missiles and the church-filled horizon begins to rotate. The imagery is visually arresting and symbolically powerful, demonstrating a clear mastery of cinematic language and earning the film a place in the history of Armenian cinematography. The film was awarded the Stone Prize at the Golden Apricot Festival. One might even argue that Haroutounian's debut invites comparison with the early works of many established masters of world cinema. Stylistically, her work recalls that of Maria Saakyan (1980-2018).

Overall, the 2025 Golden Apricot International Film Festival demonstrated the continued relevance of genocide as a cinematic subject – not only in relation to Armenian tragedies, but also in films engaging with the devastation of Gaza, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and the aftermath of ISIS violence in Iraq. If anything, these films collectively suggest that the familiar slogan "Never again" has never sounded hollower than it does today.