

# **Post-Exilic Armenian “Homecoming” Films:**

## **Working-through the Traumatic Postmemory of 1915**

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by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Film Studies

Carleton University

OTTAWA, Ontario

Submitted August 2016

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*We are two sick nations: Armenians and Turks. The Armenians are suffering an enormous trauma in relation to the Turks who live through a major paranoia towards the Armenians. We are both a clinical case.... Who will heal us? Is it the decision of French or the US Senate? Who is our doctor to write the prescription? The Armenians are the Turks' and the Turks are the Armenians' doctor. There's no other doctor or prescription. Our medicine is dialogue.*

Hrant Dink

## Abstract

The Armenian Genocide and its multigenerational effects have long been a topic of cinematic representation. Given the scarcity of archival images and the contested history of the events of 1915, filmmakers have historically been preoccupied with proving the genocide and recalling its trauma. Here, I draw attention to a group of recent documentaries by post-exilic Armenians depicting their emotionally difficult return journeys to Turkey against the background of continuing denial; and I propose that these independent and personal “homecoming” films help us better understand the Armenian filmmakers’ multigenerational diasporic rupture and relationship with their ancestral homeland. Through close examination of three of these documentaries, I argue that the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films are cautious yet promising cinematic memory work towards the working-through of the trauma of 1915 seeking the possibilities of restoring an unwelcoming space back into a homeland.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisor Aboubakar Sanogo whose help, support and guidance made me survive this long and difficult process. His invaluable comments as well as our engrossing conversations were tremendously helpful in helping me find my way when I felt terribly lost many times in the process of writing this thesis.

I also wish to thank Malini Guha and Charles O'Brien for their comments on earlier versions of this material during my graduate classes along with Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano who encouraged me to present some parts of this project as a guest lecturer in her graduate course. I also owe big thanks to the wonderful staff members of the Carleton Film Department, especially to Diane Berezowski, Barbara Shannon, and Jack Coghill for helping and encouraging me in different stages of my graduate program.

I would like to thank especially Serge Avédikian, Mathieu Zeitindjioglu and Nigol Bezjian and all the other Armenian filmmakers who graciously shared their films, time and insights with me.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, especially Duygu Gül Kaya for their unending support and understanding in this most challenging time of my life.

And to Ümit my wings, and to Ekin my home, without you two I would not even imagine coming this far.

*To my son Ekin*

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## Introduction

In the winter of 2008 French-Armenian director Serge Avédikian screened his film *We Drank the Same Water / Nous avons bu la même eau* (2008) at the University of Ottawa Auditorium. Following the viewing, Avédikian answered questions regarding his film about his journey to his grandfather Avedis' birthplace, Sölöz, Turkey. The audience asked whether he was not afraid of travelling to Turkey, to which Avédikian replied by admitting that he had some apprehensions at the start, but that he was still glad he had done it. Later in the evening, when I asked Avédikian about the impact of the film on his life, he candidly answered that the journey had saved him thousands of Euros in psychotherapy. During the following years, as a freelance journalist for *Agos*, an Istanbul-based Turkish Armenian newspaper, I covered the annual Toronto International Pomegranate Armenian Film Festival. There, I witnessed the predominantly Armenian audience raise the same questions over and over again about the fear of return and the impact of the journey on diasporic Armenian directors who had documented their own journeys to Turkey. Soon, I realized that an increasing number of filmmakers from the diaspora were overcoming their anxieties and making the difficult decision to embark on a "return" journey to Turkey for the first time since their grandparents' exile. These filmmakers' relationship to Turkey and their cinematic voyages as members of the Armenian diaspora led me to reflect on our shared traumatic history, its cinematic expression and our collective memory. As a person from Turkey who grew up with the official Turkish historical narrative about the Armenian Genocide, I have been captivated by these filmmakers and their films which portray a very different land from the one I had known as home. These films that interlace the directors' fears with their curiosities have inspired me to seek to understand the motivation behind the journeys. These

courageous cinematic returns after a hundred year of rupture offered a unique diasporic perspective onto the ways in which Turkey negotiated the events of 1915.

The traumatic history that deeply informs these films starts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Turkish nationalism, which in turn led to the denigration of Christian minorities, especially Armenians. The attacks against Armenian communities that started in the early 1890s culminated in 1915 in the death and deportation of over a million people, in what has since become known as the Armenian Genocide. Armenians have since formed one of the world's largest diasporas estimated to be over five million people in more than 75 countries. Even though the overwhelming majority of the international community of historians and scholars recognize the events of 1915 as genocide, the Turkish state has systematically denied that what was done to Armenians constituted genocide.<sup>1</sup>

The events of 1915 and its trauma have long been a topic of interest for world cinema in both documentary and fictional modes. These films have mainly focused on proving that the genocide had happened and on representing its trauma and tragedy. However, as the centennial of the genocide approached, against the background of continuing official Turkish denial, third and later generation diasporic Armenian filmmakers began to produce novel "homecoming" documentaries by returning to their ancestral homeland. These documented journeys are deeply personal endeavours for these filmmakers who travel to unknown, yet significant places in their family and

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<sup>1</sup> On April 21, 2004 The Canadian House of Commons adopted the private members' Bill M-380, which labeled the tragic events of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire as "Armenian Genocide" in the following terms: "That this House acknowledges the Armenian genocide of 1915 and condemns this act as a crime against humanity." In this thesis, I refer to the events of 1915 as the Armenian Genocide in accordance with the above definition, which is also compatible with the manner in which the film directors examined in this study refer to these events.

cultural history, and face the descendants of those whom they believe were responsible for their trauma and open wound. While they provide a rare insight into the Turkish people's frame of mind about the genocide and its persistent denial in the context of everyday life interactions, the resulting films also allow the directors to cinematically narrate their grandparents' untold stories through their own physical and emotional journeys to their places of origin.

My thesis explores the narrative and textual aspects of this new school of emerging documentaries by Armenian filmmakers within the historical context of the Armenian Genocide and its denial. My focus is to understand how the cinematic representation of these personal return journeys intersects with the filmmakers' quest to work-through their traumatic postmemory. My aim is three-fold: First, to establish the historicity of these films that document personal journeys by the survivors' descendants into a land of colossal trauma, deemed off-limits for nearly a century; second, to explain how these post-exilic films are structured, including their fundamental aesthetic and thematic preoccupations, which I address by showing how they expand the accented cinema and post-exilic identity paradigm, given the filmmakers' multigenerational diasporic rupture with the ancestral homeland; and third, to explain how these films expose, help remember, and come to terms with the trauma of 1915 transmitted by the survivors despite the century-old ongoing conflicted relationship with Turkey. I accomplish my aim primarily through a combination of historical, theoretical and close textual analyses of three post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films representative of a growing school of documentaries.

The three films selected as part of my case studies operate at three levels of distinction, focusing in varying degrees on a particular aspect of the ancestral homeland: a specific region or community identified through personal and familial ties; Turkey at large, as a physical and human geography with a particular historicity; and, finally, modern day Armenian communities as the locus of a vulnerable, yet resilient Armenian heritage.

Each of the three films prioritizes one of these areas of focus. *We Drank the Same Water / Nous avons bu la même eau* (2007) by French/Armenian director Serge Avedikian mostly portrays Avédikian's return to his familial roots with a focus on the community of Sölöz where Avédikian's grandparents lived up until the genocide. The film, made over three successive journeys between 1987 and 2005, traces the director's ancestral heritage. *The Son of the Olive Merchant / Le fils du marchand d'olives* (2011) is produced by French/Armenian filmmaker Mathieu Zeitindjioglou who inherited his Turkified last name from his genocide survivor grandfather. Zeitindjioglou and his new wife, travel across Turkey and interview everyday people they meet on the road about the genocide and its denial. *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul* (2013) by Syrian/Armenian Nigol Bezjian is an intimate rediscovery of Istanbul's Armenian heritage. Bezjian takes the viewers on a stroll through the old streets of Istanbul once populated by Armenians to rediscover the places that were the centre of Armenian art and culture.

In recent years there has been a growing scholarly interest in the artistic and cinematic representation of the transmitted trauma caused by the Armenian Genocide and its denial. However, compared to other non-fiction and fictional cinematic representations, these relatively recent, daring and private non-fiction films have not been

discussed or analyzed by film studies scholars. These films fill a specific gap in the representation of the personal and collective multigenerational trauma of 1915 through the filmmakers' intimate interactions with the locals and original camera work in a geography long thought to be inaccessible. Hence the greater scholarly attention needed to better understand these pioneering films which publically expose the filmmakers' private suffering, render visible their deeply rooted attachment to and difficult relationship with Turkey, and visually piece together their familial stories.

For an historical grounding of my topic, I draw on the scholarly literature on Armenian Genocide studies mainly benefiting from historians such as Taner Akçam and Fatma Müge Göçek. Their studies shed considerable light on the events prior to and during 1915, on relevant government policies, and the social and cultural impacts of these events on generations of Armenians in Turkey and in the diaspora. While Akçam uncovers the decision-making processes, the methods of implementation and the bureaucratic apparatus behind the genocide, Göçek's work shows how a narrative of denial was constructed over the course of recent Turkish history. I have also relied on Richard White's thesis that offers an in-depth discussion of how the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide impacts on Turkish-Armenian relationships and the role of civil society in challenging this state sanctioned memory.

The two main bodies of scholarship most relevant to the work here are texts on the first person/personal/autobiographical documentary, including literature on accented and post-exilic films, as well as those concerned with postmemory and the cinematic representation of trauma. I mainly draw on Hamid Naficy's accented cinema and Nellie Hogikyan's post-exilic identity paradigms to conceptualize the filmmakers' subject

positions central to my study. The notion of accented cinema offers a suitable preliminary conceptual framework to approach the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films, given the directors’ diasporic and deterritorialized identities, and key elements of their autobiographical films such as journeying, border-crossing, use of chronotopes, and epistolarity. However, these filmmakers’ temporally and geographically distanced relationship to their ancestral homeland calls for the expansion of Naficy’s framework by also considering these films through Hogikyan’s post-exilic analytical lens that differentiates post-exilic from exilic identity, while underscoring the central role of the family for the former.

I also draw on the works of Michael Renov and Laura Rascaroli to expand, respectively, the subjective and the first-person documentary dimensions of the post-exilic films. Furthermore, Alisa Lebow’s analysis of how in personal films the first person singular “I” is intertwined with the first person plural “we” also informs my conceptualization of the connection between the post-exilic filmmaker’s personal narration of his journeying experiences and the audience’s preoccupation with the historicity of the Armenian Genocide, its acceptance and denial. By combining this conceptual work with the close textual analysis of the three films (my case studies), while analyzing their key defining features, I show how these post-exilic films’ unique construction helps better understand the relationship of the post-exile with the ancestral homeland in the context of multigenerational displacement and the transmitted trauma of a haunting past.

The Armenian Genocide is one of history’s most traumatic events not only because of the scope of its original impact, but also and especially due to its ongoing

contested nature and its denial, along with the global extent of the modern day Armenian diaspora. Therefore, any discussion of the filmic representation of issues related to the intergenerational transmission of trauma or memory work must relate to theories of trauma, and especially how film can best address traumatic (post)memory and its effects.

With respect to the aspect of my analysis that deals with the cinematic representation of traumatic postmemory, I draw on Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory to focus on the significance of transmitted trauma for Armenian post-genocide generations. I also bring into play Marie-Aude Baronian's call for "acts of memory" in response to the need to produce new visual evidence to offset the destroyed or missing archival images of the genocide and demonstrate the novel role the post-exilic Armenian films play in producing fresh images and visual evidence without having to prove the genocide as a historical fact.

I conclude with Dominick LaCapra's work whose key contribution to trauma theory in the context of history and cultural studies has been his elaboration of the notions of 'acting-out' and 'working-through', two interacting processes or forms of remembering trauma. LaCapra, by building on Freud's psychiatric approach to trauma and Cathy Caruth's work, argues that "trauma is the open wound... the gap in the past that resists being entirely filled in; healed or harmonized in the present... It is a "nothing" that remains unnamable" (LaCapra 1997, 244). Through conceptual and close textual analysis, I aim to show that post-exilic "homecoming" Armenian films open-up a distinct cinematic space from within which they, unlike any other fiction or documentary, validate, re-write and also reinvent the filmmakers' traumatic postmemory through a

postmemorial aesthetic work that enables the filmmakers to form their own memory of the Armenian Genocide and of its denial in order to share them with their audiences.

In this study, I am interested in examining only the non-fiction films made by Armenians of post-genocide (mostly third) generations who travel to Turkey to document their “return” journey. However, I exclude fiction and experimental films that depict diasporic characters’ journeys to Turkey<sup>2</sup> and journey films by post-exilic Armenian filmmakers to the Republic of Armenia which is often referred to as “home” by much of the diaspora. Also out of scope for my study is an elaborate critical review of the plethora of scholarly and literary sources of analysis on the definition of the 1915 events as genocide. Due to the focus and restricted scope of my study, my discussion of the historical background has been limited to a cursory analysis.

In undertaking my study, I have relied on several types of analyses: critical review of relevant film theory and Armenian Genocide studies literature; review of current Turkish governmental policies and statements regarding the “Ermeni meselesi” (*the Armenian issue*); review of global current affairs surrounding the recognition versus denial controversy; review of print and electronic media sources covering interviews with the post-exilic Armenian filmmakers and the reception of their films by various audiences across the globe. My study also relied on viewing numerous fiction and documentary films on or about the Armenian Genocide; I have however conducted my close textual analysis on the three films mentioned above by Avédikian, Zeitindjioglou, and Bezjian.

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<sup>2</sup> There have been a few fiction films such as Eric Nazarian’s short *Bolis* (2011) and *Ararat* (2002) with its short video segment that depicts the character’s journey to his ancestral land. Two other similar noteworthy attempts which are not strictly personal documentaries are Tina Bastajian’s 2001 experimental film *Jagadakeer* that is inspired by her journey to Turkey and also Lusin Dink’s 2013 *SaroyanLand* that dramatizes famous Armenian American writer William Saroyan’s return to his father’s birth town Bitlis in Anatolia in 1964 through reenactments.

Furthermore, I conducted interviews with Zeitindjioglou and Bezjian which also informed my analysis.

In Chapter one, I provide an overview of the historical background of the Armenian Genocide and its cinematic representations to present the context needed for the understanding of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films. In the first part of the Chapter, I briefly discuss the socio-historical conditions of the minority Armenian communities in the Ottoman era and the conflicts leading to the traumatic events of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I explain how the modern Republic of Turkey has developed a willful amnesia towards the events of 1915, which became the basis of a century-old official historical denialist narrative in spite of an increasing international recognition of the events as genocide. Furthermore, I discuss the formation of a sizable Armenian diaspora which has had for generations a conflicted relationship with Turkey. I then outline the history of the cinematic representation of the Armenian Genocide starting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, explaining the continuing interest in film productions over the years especially as the centennial of the genocide approached. The post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” journey films emerged in the early 2000s as a distinct group of documentaries from within this century-old tradition of fiction and non-fiction films on the Armenian Genocide. I explain how the rise of identity politics in relatively liberal socio-political conditions in Turkey has facilitated the journeys of this new group of filmmakers.

Chapter two starts with a brief overview of the three post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films selected for close textual examination. I then analyze the key defining features of these films as personal documentaries made by “accented”

filmmakers with post-exilic and transnational biographical trajectories. More specifically, I show how these first person documentaries constitute an uneasy “return” to the familial homeland, which is emotionally challenging and rewarding for the filmmaker; how they actively seek to create open chronotopes as countervailing spaces to a dominant traumatic chronotope frozen in 1915; and, finally, how they also function as letter films addressed to a wide reaching global diaspora.

In Chapter three, I review the concept of postmemory and underline the significance of traumatic postmemory for Armenian post-genocide generations before arguing that post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films introduce a distinct and promising postmemorial aesthetic work. This personal documentary-based approach to memory work experiments with rethinking and reinvesting the traumatic postmemory of the Armenian Genocide with novel images, meanings, and relationships. As a result, through the filmmakers’ determined pursuit of their journeys and engagement with the local people, and the interplay of denial and acknowledgement of the genocide, these films circumvent the repetitive acting-out of the trauma of 1915 and produce an aesthetic process towards working-through the century-old trauma.

Taken as a whole, beyond the specificity of these case studies and of post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” filmmaking, my thesis is also intended to contribute to the study of the Armenian Genocide by drawing attention to the need to better understand the interpersonal aspect of working-through the transmitted trauma as a response to the post-exilic longing for and desire to belong to the ancestral homeland.

## Chapter 1 - Background: The Armenian Genocide and its Cinematic Representation

The purpose of this chapter, which is organized in three main sections, is to provide a historical context for the Armenian Genocide and its cinematic representation. In the first section, I provide an overview of the relevant historical background leading to the events of 1915 before discussing the still continuing denial of the 1915 events as genocide in the context of its growing recognition internationally. Next, I explain the emergence and the significance of the Armenian diaspora across the world which constitutes the main audience of the films examined in this study. In the second section, I briefly discuss the history and key turning points of the cinematic representation of the Armenian Genocide, highlighting some of the main fiction and non-fiction productions. In the final and third section of the chapter, I show the origins of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films and their overall focus and distinguishing aspects, before introducing the three films I use as case studies to illustrate my arguments.

Although fraught with controversies, like many histories, the history of the Armenian Genocide and its denial is an indispensable point of departure for our understanding of the visual representation of the Armenian Genocide, including in the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films. Regardless of where the final responsibilities may rest, and regardless of the motivations of decision makers, competing interpretations of events, and differing statistics, it is generally agreed that almost the entire population of Armenians who had lived in Anatolia for centuries died or were displaced in 1915; they were deported, massacred, or starved to death on long deportation marches. These catastrophic events, the survivors’ trauma transmitted to later generations, and the

ongoing denial have motivated and shaped the cinematic fiction and non-fiction representation of the Armenian Genocide for nearly a century. It is therefore crucial to understand this complex history that has given birth relatively recently to a new school of documentaries. What sets these films apart is that, being grounded in the history of the Armenian Genocide, they are made by the survivors' grandchildren and that they portray the directors' *own* personal "return" journeys to Turkey, their ancestral homeland.

### Historical Background

For over two thousand years, the Armenian highland, lying in eastern Turkey and including modern Armenia, parts of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh, was the land of several Armenian kingdoms. In the 11th century, having converted to Islam, the first Turkic tribes began to settle in Anatolia by pushing the Byzantine Empire further west. By the time Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, Anatolia had been largely inhabited by a Turkish-speaking Muslim population. By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Western Armenia had come under the complete control of the Ottoman Empire while Eastern Armenia remained part of Safavid Persia, thus dividing Armenia into east and west, and historically separating Armenians both linguistically and culturally<sup>3</sup> (Alajaji 2015, 6).

In the diverse Ottoman Empire, Turkish Sunni Muslim ruling classes lived side by side with a number of ethnic and religious minorities, including Armenians. As the empire was ruled by an Islamic Caliphate under Sharia law, Christians and Jews, called

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<sup>3</sup> "The present-day former Soviet Armenia, where the Eastern Armenian dialect is spoken, is supposed to be the homeland of all Armenians—natives and diasporans alike; however, the post-genocide and post-exile diasporans are the descendants of Armenians who lived in western Armenia (speaking the Western Armenian dialect)" (Hogikyan 2007, 202).

“*dhimmi*” (protected non-Muslim subjects), were granted considerable religious freedom. While this gave the non-Muslim minorities a relative degree of autonomy, they still had second-class citizen status compared to Muslims (Cohan 2005) (Akçam 2006).

The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims under Ottoman rule was not one of equals. “According to Islamic civil law, Muslims enjoyed the full rights and duties of “citizenship” while the *dhimmi*’s rights were limited to protection from violation and depredation.” (Akçam 2006, 22). For example, the *dhimmis* were not able to bear arms, serve in the military, or testify against Muslims in court. The Ottoman Empire’s relatively pluralist treatment of its non-Muslim subjects was mostly based on “humiliation and toleration” (Akçam 2006, 24). However, even though they were forced to pay additional taxes, Christians managed to thrive economically and culturally while some Armenians became part of a wealthy, mostly non-Muslim merchant class (White 2013, 20).

Towards the end of the 18th century, the spread of constitutionalism in Europe created a desire among the Christian minorities for greater rights and freedoms. Moreover, peace treaties resulting from the wars between the Ottoman Empire and the European powers brought significant privileges to Christians, while European-educated Ottoman elites also promoted greater rights for minorities. However, their progressive ideas were resisted “by the Muslim masses and religious elites who opposed measures prompting equal rights for all the Empire’s subjects, regardless of religion and favored continued Muslim supremacy” (21).

Even though “during the *Tanzimat* era, a period of political and administrative reformation in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876, many Armenians reached

high positions in the Ottoman government in such fields as foreign affairs and finances,” they often did not have a significant decision making power (Astourian 1999, 26). Nevertheless, this growing Armenian influence in the public and political sphere further contributed to the perception among the Muslim Ottomans that they were losing their superiority over to non-Muslims. During the same period new states were created in territories that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, such as Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Russia conquered some of the eastern Armenian provinces, its growing influence on Ottoman Armenians created “Russophobia” among the Muslims and the treatment of Armenians in the empire worsened (White 2013, 21).

Armenian revolts, backed by Russia, against the Ottoman authority in the late 19th century were brutally repressed under the orders of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II. During the winter of 1895-1896 the Sultan’s semi-regular *Hamidiye* regiments consisting of Kurdish and Circassian horsemen massacred nearly 200,000 Armenians in the empire’s eastern provinces (Akçam; White). Known as *Hamidiye* massacres, these events prompted relief efforts by Western missionaries and diplomats through the American Red Cross and created a fair amount of reaction in the Western media (Torchin 2012). As a result, thousands of Armenians fled the region and found refuge in Europe and the United States, which initiated the formation of the Armenian diaspora in exile. Some Armenians who could not flee, but saw the imminent danger chose to convert to Islam in order to save their lives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon known as hidden Armenians (Turkish: gizli / dönme Ermeniler) or crypto-Armenians came to public attention as a growing number of Muslim citizens of the modern Turkish Republic began to self-identify as “hidden Armenians” or “converts starting in the early 2000s. (Arango 2015) (Ayşe Gül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin 2014).

Starting in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, several reformist groups known as the Young Turks emerged as an opposition movement interested in constitutional reforms, a positivist program of scientific advancement, and in instituting a modern state and elite rule. Later on some of these Young Turks came together under the umbrella of the “Committee of Union and Progress” (CUP) against the rule of Abdul-Hamid II. The CUP whose dominant emergent ideology was Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism (Turkey for Turks) saw the Christian minorities, especially the Armenians, as a threat to national unity. Against the background of ensuing power struggles between the CUP and the Sultan, a major assault took place against Armenians in 1909 when local Muslims in the province of Adana (a large city in southeastern Turkey) attacked Armenian villages and killed between 20,000 to 30,000 civilian Armenians.

State officials and civilians responsible for the *Hamidiye* and Adana massacres were never punished; on the contrary, members of the Muslim public who participated in the Adana killings were in fact rewarded (Akçam 2006). According to Akçam, public reactions to these two events helped legitimize the hatred and violence against the Armenian population, hence preparing the ground for the 1915 genocide.<sup>5</sup>

The threats against Ottoman borders became a reality as the “sick man of Europe” continued to lose more territory in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and at the battle of Sarikamiş to Russians in 1914. As Russia began to control parts of the eastern Ottoman frontiers mainly populated by Armenians, the Ottoman government became increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Hovanissian “points out the differences between the massacres up to and after 1915. According to him, although there appears to be a continuum of violence against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, “the objectives of Abdul-Hamid in the 1890s were quite different from those of Young Turks in 1915”. While Abdul-Hamid “resorted to massacres in his futile efforts to maintain the old order,” the Young Turks “perpetrated genocide to overturn the status quo and create a new order and a new frame of reference in which there was no place at all for Armenians” (cited in Köksal 2010, 127).

concerned about their Armenian subjects whom they saw as traitor. This in turn fueled public sentiment against Armenians at a time when the Ottoman Empire, under the spell of the CUP, was preparing to enter World War I as an ally of Germany.

The CUP, led by a triumvirate of military officers, called “Pashas”, (Mehmet Talat, Minister of Interior, Ismail Enver, Minister of War, and Ahmed Cemal, Minister of Navy) was not only instrumental in Ottoman involvement in WWI, but also led the design of the 1915 campaign against Ottoman Armenian subjects perceived as a growing and significant internal threat to the remaining integrity of the Ottoman territory especially in the East.<sup>6</sup>

### The Armenian Genocide

On April 24, 1915 about 250 prominent Armenian community leaders, including politicians, and religious, literary, and educational figures in Istanbul were rounded up, arrested and later executed or sent into exile. What ensued is a series of state sanctioned and orchestrated events that led to the execution and mass deportation of Armenians from all over Anatolia. On May 30<sup>th</sup> 1915 the CUP government with directions from the three *Pashas*, Enver, Cemal and Talat, passed the *Tehcir* (the deportation law) and began to implement the genocide (White 2013, 32). This law “empowered the military and other organizations to suppress armed resistance and deport populations suspected of treason or espionage, giving façade legality to events already occurring throughout the Empire” (32). In the following months and years, a secret service organization called *Teskilati*

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<sup>6</sup> Some scholars argue that the CUP used WWI as an opportunity and pretext to eliminate Armenians under the cover of wartime casualties while avoiding international scrutiny (Akçam 2006). The German vice-counsel in Erzurum, Max Ervin von Scheubner-Richter notes in his reports that the Unionists “frankly admit that the ultimate objective of the actions against the Armenians is complete annihilation. The utterance “After the war, not a single Armenian shall remain in Turkey” belongs, word for word to one of the prominent [Unionist] individuals” (Akçam, Shameful Act 2006).

*Mahsusa* (Special Organization) was in charge of the deportations. By the summer of 1915 the law that was initially passed to deport Armenians along the borders of Eastern Anatolia had expanded its scope to include all Armenians across the Ottoman territory. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Armenians not just from Eastern Anatolia, but also far from the war zones in Western Turkey were forced to move from their hometowns with wartime necessities as the stated reason.

By the end of the 1918 it is estimated that about one million Armenians had been killed throughout the Empire, “more than half of the Armenian population on its historic homeland, were dead, and the Armenian community and personal properties were lost, appropriated by the government, stolen by others or deliberately destroyed” (Cohan 2005, 333).<sup>7</sup> The number of deaths had reached 1.5 million by 1923, the year of the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic.

### ***The Collapse of the CUP, Military Tribunals and the Modern Turkish Republic***

When the Ottoman Empire lost WWI against the Allied powers, the CUP government also collapsed and Sultan Abdul-Hamid regained his power. Under pressure from the Great Powers and in light of ongoing disdain for the Young Turks in general, the Sultan commissioned a military tribunal to investigate the crimes committed by the CUP during the war (White 2013). After the tribunals in 1919-1920, the court

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<sup>7</sup> The tragic dimensions of the ensuing events are sufficiently illustrated in various accounts: “Between April and November 1915 more than 600,000 Armenian men, women and children were murdered in the area of Lake Van, the towns of Bitlis, Erzurum, and Diyarbakir, and along the upper reaches of Tigris and Euphrates rivers” (Gilbert 2003,16) and “Within months, the Euphrates and Tigris rivers became clotted with the bodies of Armenian women and children, polluting the water supply for those who had not yet perished. Dysentery and other diseases were rampant and those who managed to survive the march found themselves in concentration camps” (Cohan 2005, 333). During deportations, many Armenian women became victims of rape while children were stolen to be raised in local Turkish or Kurdish families as Muslims. However, it has also been reported that some “sympathetic Turkish families also risked their own lives to help their Armenian neighbors escape” (Cohan 2005, 333).

acknowledged the CUP leaders' responsibility for the massacres against the Armenians and made it clear that the entire nation cannot be held responsible for the deeds of "couple of thugs". They sentenced the three major figures of the CUP Enver, Talat and Cemal Pashas to death in absentia for their role in the destruction of Armenian populations and their responsibility for the entry of the Ottoman Empire in the WWI.

1919-1920 also marked the start of the Turkish War of Independence by the Turkish Nationalist Movement (*Kuvvayi Milliye*) under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk against the Allies and their proxies occupying the Ottoman Empire. The victory of the Nationalist Movement resulted in the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic that replaced the Ottoman Empire. As a result, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire which had recognized Christian minority rights and carved out an Armenian territory was abandoned. Instead, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in July 1923 establishing the borders of today's Turkey and subsequently marking the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Determined to create a modern and secular nation state, the Republic of Turkey aimed to cut its ties with the Ottoman past and Islamic identity. As a result, instead of addressing the consequences of "war time crimes", including the Armenian genocide, the new Turkish republic saw the land and rights claims of the minorities such as the Armenians and the Kurds as part of the grand plan of the Allied powers who wanted to destroy the national unity of Turkey (Akçam, 2006). With the establishment of the Republic, it was as if Turkey had woken up to a new country without any public memory or history. In this state of willful amnesia, there was no room in the official state narratives for the Armenian Genocide. Although Atatürk, the founding father of the

Turkish Republic, had distanced himself from the CUP, the new state ideology of Turkish nationalism he promoted as the principal unifying force had its origins in the nationalist ideology of the CUP (White 2013, 46). The CUP's aspirations of demographic engineering for the creation of a monolithic nation- state became a key component of the Kemalist narrative of modernity. In Atatürk's imagined homogenous new Turkey, Anatolia was presented as the homeland of Turks, Turkish became the only recognized and official language of the country, and Turkishness became *the* fundamental binding element of a modern concept of citizenship.

Although Atatürk referred to the events of 1915 as a “shameful act” or “mistreatment committed by some instigators and agitators”, the Kemalist narrative of history that begins in May 1919 at the start of War of Independence, has not accorded any responsibility to the Ottoman Empire, Turks, or the Republic of Turkey for the deaths and displacement of Armenians from their traditional homeland (Ulgen 2010).

### ***Continuing Denial versus Recognition***

Even though the overwhelming majority of the international community of historians and scholars recognize the events of 1915 as genocide, the Turkish state has systematically denied that what was done to Armenians in 1915 was genocide. However, as of June 2016 twenty-six countries including Canada, Austria, Russia and France as well as 45 out of the 50 states of the United States of America, have officially recognized the events of 1915 as genocide (Armenian National Institute 1998- 2016).

Genocide is a legal term coined by Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944, whose work motivated the passage in 1948 of the United Nations Convention on the

Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>8</sup> The Armenian Genocide played a key role in Lemkin's thought who in turn declared that "A strong parallel may be drawn between the extermination of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire by the Turks and the extermination of the Jews by the Germans" (Jacobs 2009, 132).

Generally speaking, Turkey does not refute the death and displacement of Armenians, which is established by accounts of eyewitnesses such as missionaries and diplomats, survivors' testimonies, and limited photographic evidence. However the official Turkish state historical narratives represent Armenians mainly as traitors who had stabbed Turkey in the back by supporting the invading Russian forces, which therefore justified their deportations as a punitive and precautionary wartime action. This narrative also claims that the number of Turks killed by armed bands formed by the Armenian revolutionary committees matches or even exceeds that of the Armenian deaths.<sup>9</sup>

Until 2008, according to Turkey's penal code 301, to describe 1915 events as genocide was considered to be an "insult to Turkishness" and was reason for prosecution. One of the most prominent advocates of Armenian people's rights in Turkey, Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was murdered by a 17 year old nationalist on January 19, 2007 in an environment of public hatred created against him through such trials. Even though his murder created a big sensation in the world about the on-going state denial, Turkey

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<sup>8</sup>The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by Resolution 260 (III) of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948, defines genocide as follows: "In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a) Killing members of the group; b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group ." <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>

<sup>9</sup> Turkish historian Ersin Kalaycıoğlu citing 600,000 Armenian deaths from various sources, states that over 1,000,000 Muslim died in Eastern Turkey in most of the eastern provinces where Armenian nationalists (*Dashnaks*) were active during this time, sometimes accounting for 60% of the population of province, and denies any state conspiracy against the Armenians. (Kalaycıoğlu 2004, 34).

continues to categorically oppose the recognition of 1915 as genocide<sup>10</sup> and “spends huge sums of money revising histories to omit accounts of the genocide” (Sirgianian 2007, 134).<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the Turkish Republic’s history, official text books for high school curriculum have used the term “baseless” or “so-called Armenian Genocide” to describe the deportations and death of Armenians. After 2012, the term in the textbooks was replaced by “1915 events” by the Minister of Education to align with the EU Membership requirements. However, a documentary commissioned by The General Staff of the Republic of Turkey entitled *Sarı Gelin: Ermeni Sorununun İç Yüzü (Blonde Bride: The Inside Story of The Armenian Incident)* (2003) is a recent example of the decades-old official denialist approach to 1915 (Keleş 2009). To date, Turkey keeps its border with the Republic of Armenia closed “since Turkey has the non-recognition of the Armenian Genocide as one of the precondition for reestablishing relations and opening the border” (Göçek 2015, 2).

On the 100th anniversary of the genocide in 2015 Pope Francis declared the 1915 mass killings of Armenians "the first genocide of the 20th century" and urged the international community to recognize it as such. In response, the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the Pope and openly warned him “not to make similar mistakes again" (Deutsche Welle 2015). In June 2016, however, during his visit to Yerevan, Pope Francis referred to the Armenian deaths in 1915 again as genocide, which

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<sup>10</sup> Some examples of the Turkish denialist rhetoric: <http://www.tallarmentale.com> <http://www.ataa.org/reference/facts-ataa.html>; <http://www.eraren.org/index.php?Page=&Lisan=en> <http://www.turkishcanadians.com/info-center/current-issues/>; <http://www.armeniangenocidedebate.com>

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Cohen in his 2001 book *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* states that few denials other than the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide “have been sustained with such determination over such long period” (Cohen 2001,135).

was vehemently opposed by Turkey on account that there were losses during the war on both sides and that Pope's statements reflected a well-known "crusader mentality" (BBC News 2016). Also in June 2016, the German Parliament overwhelmingly adopted a symbolic resolution declaring the deaths of Armenians in 1915 a genocide, which resulted in the Turkish government's denunciation of the vote as "null and void" and the recall of the Turkish ambassador in Germany back to Ankara for consultations. The German resolution was distinct in its acknowledgement of Germany's complicity in the deportation and killings of the Armenians through German military's direct and indirect role. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in reaction to this resolution declared one more time that Turkey never will accept the genocide under his reign: "I am addressing the whole world. You may like it, you may not. Our attitude on the Armenian issue is clear from the beginning. We will never accept the accusations of genocide" (Aljazeera News 2016).

This clash between recognition and denial is likely to continue for some time. However, regardless of how or whether it is resolved, the long-lasting dispute will keep the century-old wound open and almost certainly intensify the trauma experienced by Armenians the world over.

### *The Armenian Diaspora*<sup>12</sup>

Regardless whether the events of 1915 are called genocide, war time casualties or forced migration, the fact remains that over 200,000 Armenian survivors were exiled, who went on to form one of the largest diaspora communities around the world (Pattie 2005, 126). Armenians who lived in eastern Turkey, with a few exceptions, either

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<sup>12</sup> In this study, by diaspora I refer to all Armenians with family roots in Anatolia, including those who currently live in Armenia with ancestors whose original hometown is located in Turkey.

became the victims of the 1915 genocide or were exiled as a result of mass deportations. Most survivors first migrated to countries such as Syria, Iran, Lebanon and Egypt where there were already sizable Armenian communities and continued to lead culturally semi-autonomous lives with relative freedom of language and religion, mostly centered around churches. Many Armenians however have eventually migrated all over the world, mainly to Europe, North and South America.<sup>13</sup>

Armenians of second and later generations in the diaspora experience the trauma of 1915 and effects of the genocide through their collective shared postmemory which functions as the single most powerful unifying factor. The wounds of 1915 remain open for these people spread around the world like the seeds of a pomegranate.<sup>14</sup> “The Turkish denial prevents all Armenians scattered throughout the world from adequately mourning, grieving, and thereby eventually coming to terms with their own tragic pasts” (Göçek 2015). This denied past has been the fixation and core essence of Armenian trans-national identity for over a century. “With the complete destruction of the homeland (Western Armenia) and no hope of return, diaspora became a fact of life for Armenians” (White 2013, 49).

The population of Eastern Armenia increased during the First World War as a result of Armenians who fled the Ottoman Empire to find refuge there. Even though Armenia declared its independence in 1918, it became in 1922, after a period of Sovietization, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the twelve original Soviet

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<sup>13</sup> While today, only about 60,000 Armenians remain in Turkey, mostly in Istanbul (Tololyan 2005) it is estimated that there are around 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians living in the United States. Los Angeles is considered the second largest "Armenian" city in the world after Yerevan. The number of people of Armenian ethnic origin is about 40,000 in Canada, 30,000 in Australia, 60,000 in Argentina and 15,000 in the rest of Latin America, while around 300,000 live in France, and another 100,000 in the rest of Europe (Tololyan 2005)

<sup>14</sup> The pomegranate, with its symbolic association with fertility, is the national fruit of Armenians.

republics. Following Soviet “repatriation” policies in 1940s many diaspora Armenians, mostly genocide survivors from the Middle East, migrated to the Republic of Armenia.<sup>15</sup>

In 1965 the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide became a pivotal point for Armenians all around the world especially in Soviet Armenia in terms of calls for remembrance of the 1915 genocide. In the 1970s there was an increasing urge to create awareness of the 1915 events and to call for the recognition of the genocide by the Turkish government. Increasingly politicized youths from diaspora and Armenia created the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) which targeted Turkish diplomats and diplomatic facilities in more than 16 different countries between 1975 and 1983. Even though ASALA’s stated objectives were to create an awareness of the genocide and force Turkey to recognize the genocide, their attacks resulting in the death and injury of many civilians created a backlash in Turkey, re-enforcing the national discourse of denial.

The collapse of the USSR and the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan about the Nagorno-Karabakh region (1992 - 1994) were other recent factors contributing to the growth of the Armenian diaspora. Today, it is generally accepted that there are more Armenians in the world living outside the Republic of Armenia. Indeed, while some five million Armenians constitute the diaspora, less than three million live in the Republic of Armenia (Pattie 2005).

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<sup>15</sup> However, the “repatriated” Armenians had major integration problems and despite the promise of a better life in their new homeland, they were mostly stripped of their belongings, were forced to live in harsh conditions and many were exiled to Siberian and Central Asian prisons (Harutyunyan 2006, 191). After Stalin’s death and by the early 1970s, thousands of repatriates left Soviet Armenia and joined the larger Armenian diaspora, but remained committed to helping Soviet Armenia. “They believed that Armenia should be supported, no matter who ruled it. This view maintained that the diaspora would soon die out through assimilation and physical threats and that the republic was the only viable long-term solution for an Armenian future” (Pattie 2005,126).

## Cinematic Representation of the Armenian Genocide

Fiction and nonfiction films on the Armenian Genocide, produced within a political environment of continuous Turkish denial of the genocide, have traditionally focused on proving the genocide and representing its horror by mainly narrating the trauma, loss, tragedy and suffering of the victims, survivors, and of later generations of Armenians (Varjabedian 2009). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a growing number of post-exilic Armenian filmmakers from the diaspora began experimenting with documentary conventions through personal and subjective journey documentaries by “returning” to their ancestral hometowns in Turkey. These autobiographical and familial films display a novel and daring approach to address the multigenerational trauma of the Armenian genocide. However highlighting their significance and originality requires a detour through a brief historical overview of key fiction and nonfiction films invested in the representation of the Armenian genocide.

The Armenian diaspora has been playing a key role in the cinematic representation of the Armenian Genocide and its trauma, which became a topic of interest starting in early 20<sup>th</sup> century for Hollywood, European cinema, and Armenian national cinema. This interest heightened following World War II in light of the cinematic representation of the Holocaust and peaked with the centennial of the genocide. From the beginning, the diaspora who were preoccupied with the pressing need to narrate the events of 1915 became not only the primary audience of these films, but were also involved in the making of these films as directors, producers, and actors. The earliest fiction film on the Armenian Genocide, *Ravished Armenia (Auction of Souls)* (1919) by Oscar Apfel, was based on the memoirs of Arshaluys (Aurora) Mardiganian. A survivor

in exile herself, Mardiganian starred in this film, which depicted the atrocities such as rape, torture, and mass killings that she had witnessed. With a clearly orientalist approach, the film “exploited American stereotypes of Islam and Turks” (Baron, 291) and portrayed the perpetrators as bloodthirsty Muslims and evil Turks (Torchin 2012). Following World War II, and especially given the increasing cinematic representation of the Holocaust, several feature films and television adaptations were made on the Armenian Genocide. These films from different parts of the world, by and large depicting the horrors of 1915 through graphic imagery, were built on real life or composite stories of survival and trauma.<sup>16</sup>

As the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide approached, Armenians, especially the Armenian diaspora had long been craving for an epic filmic representation of the genocide. “The success of *Schindler’s List* in 1993 served as an impetus to counter Turkish genocide denial with a high profile motion picture about the Armenian cataclysm” (Baron 2014, 300). The first major fiction film in response to the long wait and high expectations of the Armenian diaspora was the acclaimed Armenian Canadian director Atom Egoyan’s *Ararat* (2002). Egoyan’s unique and multilayered take on the subject, which was mocking the epic storytelling of such an historical and disputed event unfortunately, did not satisfy the Armenian audience in general.

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<sup>16</sup> The first well-known feature film from Hollywood, Elia Kazan’s Oscar winning *America America* (1963) which was loosely based on Kazan’s uncle’s story opens with the dramatic scene of massacres of the Armenians and depicts the Armenian Genocide, particularly the Hamidiye Massacres of 1895. Two early films that depict the horror of the genocide by Soviet Armenian directors are *Life Triumphs* aka *Nahapet* (1977) by Henrik Malyan and *Yearning* (1990) by Frunze Dovlatyan. While the former is about an Armenian man whose wife and children are brutally killed by Turkish soldiers, the latter is the story of a genocide survivor Arakel who secretly crosses the Armenian border to Turkey to visit his hometown which was burned down during the massacres. Another significant early production on the Armenian Genocide from the European diaspora is *Mayrig* (1991), a semi-autobiographical film written and directed by French-Armenian filmmaker Henri Verneuil who also produced *588 Rue Paradis* (1992) as a sequel to the original movie, and was also shot in France and Armenia.

As the centennial approached, several transnational epic films depicting the horror of 1915 were made. Among them are: *The Lark Farm*<sup>17</sup> (2007) by the Italian Taviani brothers; and *The Cut* (2014) which was the first feature film on the Armenian Genocide by Turkish filmmaker from Germany, Fatih Akin<sup>18</sup>. Various other films have been made since *The Cut*, which reflects the continuing interest in cinematic narration of one of the biggest calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> The most recent major production by Hollywood is *The Promise* (2016), a love story set against the background of the Armenian Genocide by the director of *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) Terry George, premiered at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival.

### Documentary Films on the Armenian Genocide

The Armenian genocide has also been the topic of various non-fiction films, which from the start were mainly preoccupied with the documentation of the massacres in order to combat their denial. However, the lack of sufficient images and archival material on the acts of genocide has made it extremely challenging for non-fiction films to depict the events of 1915.<sup>20</sup>

Mainly due to the official attempts to prevent the production of photographic and filmic images of 1915, only limited archival images have been available for use by

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<sup>17</sup> The film is a classical drama adapted from the novel *Skylark Farm* by Italian-Armenian writer Antonio Arslan whose family was a victim of the 1915 genocide. The film revolves around aristocratic Armenian Avakian family who think that their farm, belongings and lives would be safe despite the signs of the imminent genocide. However, their fate is similar to all Armenians' - while the men are killed, the women perish walking to the Syrian desert.

<sup>18</sup> Akin directed, produced and co-wrote the script of *The Cut* with the legendary Armenian scriptwriter from Hollywood, Mardik Martin. The film follows the story of Nazareth, an Armenian blacksmith from eastern Turkey, who is torn apart from his wife and two daughters during the massacres of 1915.

<sup>19</sup> Among such films are: *1915* (2015) by Garin Hovannisian and Alec Mouhibian; *Lost Birds* (2015) by Aren Perdeci and Ela Alyamaç.

<sup>20</sup> This is a challenge that documentaries on the Holocaust did not necessarily have to face on the same scale. For example, there is no stock footage available to create a documentary on the Armenian Genocide like *Night and Fog* (1955).

documentaries on the Armenian Genocide. Turkish authorities strictly prohibited the recording of images of Armenian deportees and the dead bodies during the long deportation marches (Photo Collection of Armenian Genocide). In fact, because of the inadequate volume of photographic imagery, some photographs of deportation and massacre scenes have been used so often that they have become iconic even though the identities of the people in most of these images remain unknown.<sup>21</sup> Mostly taken by the American or European missionaries and relief workers,<sup>22</sup> these images with indexical qualities provided valuable material for the nourishment of the traumatic postmemory.<sup>23</sup> They were however insufficient to provide visual evidence for the massacres and deportations during the genocide and prove the actual scale of the destruction.

As the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide approached, significant efforts to film survivor and witness testimonies began in order to address the scarcity of photographic and archival moving images<sup>24</sup>. “Until the 1960s, the men and women miraculously saved from the genocide avoided narrating anything about the bitterest years of their lives”

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<sup>21</sup> For most of these iconic images see the website of the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute: [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/photos\\_of\\_armenian\\_genocide.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/photos_of_armenian_genocide.php)

<sup>22</sup> The core of witness images are the photographs taken by German soldier, medic and poet Armin T. Wegner, near Deir ez-Zor in the Syrian Desert, a major destination point for the death marches.

<sup>23</sup> A number of stock images emerge that highlight the experience from a victim/survivor's point of view, as part of a set of common, shared experiences of the event. These images of physical abuse and harassment by the Ottoman gendarmes, rape scenes, virgin suicides in the Euphrates River, extreme thirst and starvation, and the loss of family members along the way become engrained in the collective memory of surviving generations because of their simultaneously "personal" and "shared" quality. As such, they become potent markers of group memory and fundamental to the process of understanding the Catastrophe and transferring the trauma across generations” (Chahinian, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> The earliest document on film about the survivors, *Made in America*, is a sequence of some 15 minutes shot in the Republic of Armenia in 1919 by the U.S. Signal Corps under the direction of Major General James G. Harbord, an army official sent to Anatolia and Armenia by President Woodrow Wilson. This footage was later used by J. Michael Hagopian, a leading archivist of the Armenian survivor testimonies and a documentary filmmaker. One of these rare moving images of survivors was discovered nearly a century later in 2015, buried away and forgotten in the United States Library of Congress. This 4-minute silent film titled *Armenia The Cradle of Humanity* includes images of children packed onto boats in Turkey and of marching Armenian refugees dating from 1923. The first full-length documentary on the Armenian Genocide was *Fatherland* (1945) by Gürgen Balasanyan, Levon Isahakyan and Hrayr Zargaryan from Yerevan.

(Yepremyan, et al. 2015). Influenced by the increasingly elaborate visual representation of the Holocaust and the efforts of Jewish mothers “to obligate their children to remember the names of every German responsible for the Holocaust” (Yepremyan, et al. 2015), a new trend toward documenting the dying out memories of the Armenian Genocide began. This led to the systematic incorporation of the Armenian survivors’ testimonies in post-catastrophe literature and artwork. The survivors who were not originally willing to share their tragic stories “either to protect their children from the horrors of the past or the psychological humiliations of the genocide” (Yepremyan, et al. 2015), were subsequently urged by their own children and grandchildren to speak up.

Michael Hagopian was a lead figure in the establishment of the Armenian Film Foundation<sup>25</sup> in 1979 in California, a major media project dedicated to the documentation and preservation of Armenian heritage and survivor testimonies in multi-media formats. Hagopian, himself a genocide survivor, recorded nearly 400 eyewitness testimonies of survivors and witnesses on 16mm film.<sup>26</sup> Hagopian made many expository and pedagogical documentaries<sup>27</sup> incorporating these survivor testimonies, archival photos and newsreel footage<sup>28</sup>, in addition to talking head historian accounts. These films were fact based and didactic, mainly produced to educate their audiences about the historical realities of the genocide, its trauma, atrocities, and to create the visual evidence to combat the denial.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.armenianfilm.org>

<sup>26</sup> In 2010, the Armenian Film Foundation entered into an agreement with the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation Institute to incorporate these 400 testimonies into the USC Shoah Archive. The recorded survivor accounts became some of the most valuable and essential parts of the collection of the Foundation.

<sup>27</sup> Some of the noteworthy productions by Hagopian include: *Where Are My People?* (1964); *The Forgotten Genocide* (1975); *The Armenian Genocide, Voices from the Lake* (2000); and *River Ran Red* (2003).

<sup>28</sup> Most of the time this stock footage does not cover actual events of the genocide. Instead, it mostly consists of appropriated images by the director of early archival films of Ottoman Empire.

As the 2000s approached and the Armenian filmmakers' documentaries and worldwide efforts to expand the archives through survivor and expert testimonies began to make the "Armenian case", the topic gained global attention. Major mainstream TV channels from the USA, France, Germany, and United Kingdom responded by commissioning elaborate documentary projects on the Armenian Genocide and its 90 years of denial.<sup>29</sup> Around the same time, starting in the early 2000s, new documentaries<sup>30</sup> began to explore the relationship between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust and with other relatively recent crimes against humanity, reframing it as a global universal event rather than as a forgotten local catastrophe. In response, during this period leading to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the documentary film form was also used by Turkey for the promotion of its official point of view on the events of 1915.<sup>31</sup> These state-sponsored expository documentaries were almost entirely based on interviews with historians, archivists and politicians, reenactments, stock footage and conveniently edited versions of interviews with Armenians from Turkey and the diaspora. Their overall narrative consistently stated that the decisions to deport Armenian subjects to safer locations for their protection were legitimate, that the 1915 events cannot and should not be construed as genocide, and that claims as to the Armenian Genocide are

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<sup>29</sup> The American ABC Television's 12-part series by Peter Jennings *The Century: The Forgotten Genocide* (1999) was one of the early examples of a new emerging global interest in the topic. Other significant television productions included a 2002 BBC documentary by James Miller *Armenia: The Betrayed* in England; Laurence Jordan's 2004 documentary for ARTE TV (France5) *Le génocide arménien* in France; a 2006 PBS documentary by Andrew Goldberg *The Armenian Genocide* in USA; and German filmmaker Eric Friedler's 2010 documentary *Aghet (Catastrophe)* made for the NDR (German public television).

<sup>30</sup> Among such documentaries are: M. Hagopian's *Germany and the Secret Genocide* (2003) which built on Ralph Giardono's *Die Armenische Frage Existiert Nicht Mehr (The Armenian Question No Longer Exist)* (1986) further advancing the thesis about the involvement of Germany in the Armenian genocide (Garapedian 2015); and Carla Garapedian's BBC documentary *Screamers* (2006) situating the Armenian Genocide as a reoccurring global problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to the Holocaust, and the genocides of Rwanda and Darfur (Garapedian 2015, 119).

<sup>31</sup> *Sarı Gelin: Ermeni Olayının İç Yüzü (Blonde Bride: The Inside Story of The Armenian Incident)* (2003) is a 6 episode TV production by the General Staff of the Turkish Army. *Büyük Yalan / Great Lie* (2007) and *The Story of 1915 in Armenian Documents* (2015) were both directed by Serkan Koç.

nothing but a big lie and conspiracy against the Turks (4951 Film 2016). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while the Turkish official perspective was being reflected through state-sponsored documentaries, a new wave of small production films began to emerge.

Unlike the earlier films that focused on depicting the trauma, pain, misery and tragedies of the victims and survivors, these new journey films made by mostly third generation post-exilic Armenian filmmakers began to document their cautious journeys back to their ancestral lands in Turkey. These personal, subjective and familial representations offer alternatives to the cinematic repetition of the trauma of 1915. As the grandchildren of displaced survivors, these filmmakers, actively engage on a personal level with their ancestral landscape and its people (who have been historically portrayed as evil perpetrators) and produce unique documentaries, in a way no other filmmakers had before. As a result, they create fresh memories through the documentation of highly personal and authentic “homecoming” journeys that not many Armenians have had the opportunity (or the courage for that matter) to undertake historically. The section below discusses the emergence of these films and provides an overview of their key aspects.

## **Post –Exilic Armenian “Homecoming” Films**

### ***The Origins***

Aligned with the global rise of identity politics and increasing public attention to collective memory in 1990s, Turkey entered a new era at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when “coming to terms with the past” (*geçmişle yüzleşme*) became part of mainstream public discourse. Minority communities such as Kurds, Alevis, Islamists, and Armenians with long standing claims for political and cultural inclusion began to engage in cultural collective memory work to understand and remember the pains of the past (Gül Kaya

2015). Turkey's application for membership in the European Union (EU) served as another key trigger towards the recognition of past discriminatory state policies. Beginning in 2002, and especially after the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s rise to power, Turkey's past crimes and human right violations became the subject of intense public debates by intellectuals, journalists, and well-known public figures, which created a relatively more open environment for the discussion of controversial issues such as the Armenian Genocide<sup>32</sup>.

The assassination in 2007 of Turkish Armenian journalist and human rights activist Hrant Dink, the chief editor of the weekly Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos* further attracted attention to the subject of the genocide and its denial. Around 100,000 Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian people gathered for Dink's funeral in Istanbul under the slogan "*We are all Hrant, We are all Armenians*" to condemn Dink's assassination by a 17-year old ultra-nationalist militant, and also in support of Dink's view that Turkish society must discuss the question of the Armenian Genocide in order to heal its deep wounds.<sup>33</sup> These socio-political developments have helped slowly lift the taboo around the concept of "Armenian Genocide" among intellectuals and the members of the media,

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<sup>32</sup> Between 2007 and 2011, four very important groups and associations emerged focusing on issues of memory: Hakikat, Adalet, Hafıza Merkezi (Center for Truth, Justice, Memory), Toplumsal Bellek Platformu (Collective Memory Platform), Diyarbakır Cezaevi Gerçeğini Araştırma ve Adalet Komisyonu (Investigation and Justice Commission on the Facts of Diyarbakir Prison), and Toplumsal Olayları Araştırma ve Yüzleşme Derneği (Association for Investigating Social Events and Confronting the Past (Gül Kaya, 2015 ).

<sup>33</sup> Unprecedented public solidarity and moral outrage led to the Turkish government's changing of Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code in 2008. The original version of the Article 301 stated: "Public denigration of Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey shall be punishable by imprisonment between six months and three years." Under this Article, referring to the 1915 events as "genocide" was considered denigration of Turkishness. In 2008 the term "Turkishness" was replaced by "Turkish Nation" and discussing the 1915 events as the genocide of Armenians, who are also part of the Turkish nation, has not been considered as a crime since. In 2008, a group of public intellectuals organized an Internet-based campaign entitled "I apologize", gathering over 30,000 signatures within a few days. [www.ozurdiliyoruz.com](http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com)

making it possible for academics, journalists, and artists, including filmmakers from the Armenian diaspora, to begin to freely debate the Armenian Genocide and its denial.<sup>34</sup>

Following Hrant Dink's assassination, *Agos* and later on the *International Foundation*<sup>35</sup> that was started in his honor actively struggled to challenge the state's official history of the Armenian Genocide and to build bridges between Armenian people from the diaspora and Armenia and their own ancestral heritage in Anatolia, including supporting post-exilic second and third generation Armenian filmmakers in wanting to tell their family stories through their personal "homecoming" film projects.<sup>36</sup>

In 2009 *The International Foundation* started organizing a short film competition called *Films about Conscience* inspired by Dink's words: "The voice of conscience has been sentenced to silence. Now, that conscience is searching for a way out."<sup>37</sup> Another not-for-profit cultural institution, *Anadolu Kültür*, together with the Yerevan International Golden Apricot Film Festival, also initiated an *Armenia Turkey Cinema Platform*<sup>38</sup> project to assist both Armenian and Turkish filmmakers in developing a shared vision of cinema and to help increase the number of joint productions. Most of the films supported by the *Armenia Turkey Cinema Platform*, primarily non-fiction productions, including Bezjian's *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul* and other post-exilic "homecoming" films such as *Stony Paths* (2015), revolve around issues related to the Armenian Genocide.

The earliest attempt to document such a diasporic journey to Turkey was *An*

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<sup>34</sup> Dink's murder and the nationwide reactions to it also attracted a lot of foreign media attention to the subject of the Armenian genocide and its denial. ABC Australia's *Armenian Genocide* (2008), CNN's *Scream Bloody Murder* (2008) and CBS's acclaimed television show *60 Minutes'* documentary *Battle over History* (2010) are some of the documentaries made by TV Channels after Dink's assassination.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.hrantdink.org/?Lang=en>

<sup>36</sup> *We Drank the Same Water* by Avedikian is dedicated to Hrant Dink and supported by the International Hrant Dink Foundation.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.vicdanfilmleri.org/?what>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.cinemaplatform.org/intro.aspx>

*Armenian Journey* (1988) by Ted Bogosian who traveled to Turkey in the company of a 78 year old genocide survivor Mariam Davies and her daughter Joan. As a grandchild of a genocide survivor himself, Emmy award-winning filmmaker Bogosian's clandestine journey to Istanbul and then to Arapkir, the childhood town of Mariam Davies in eastern Turkey, is a physical, emotional and filmic return journey to the source of Davies', Joan's and Bogosian's traumatic memories and postmemories. The film was a breakthrough especially given the tense socio-political conditions in Turkey<sup>39</sup>. Barely healing from the 1980 coup d'état, Turkey was told by the European Parliament that its membership application to the European Union would be conditional on its acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide (Bayraktar 2015).

With only a short segment of the 56-minute film covering the journey in Turkey, *An Armenian Journey* is mainly an expository documentary that uses ample archival black and white photos, maps and documents, and talking head commentaries by genocide scholars to educate the audience through Bogosian's didactic voice-over narration about the 1915 catastrophe and its denial by Turkey. Shot with a hand-held 8mm camera, the film is an account of Davies' extremely painful traumatic memory and her return to her childhood surroundings. As Bogosian and Davies introduce themselves as American tourists to hide their Armenian identity, their fear of being recognized by the officials is evident throughout the film.<sup>40</sup> A similar apprehension and emotional tension is

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<sup>39</sup> The increasing tension between the Kurdish guerillas and Turkish Military in eastern Turkey throughout the 1990s made mostly Kurdish occupied historical Armenian territories unsafe for diaspora Armenians. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Armenia became independent in 1991 and the attention of the diaspora turned towards Armenia throughout the 1990s. During this period the address of the diasporic homecomings was mostly the Armenian Republic (Darieva, 2013; 31).

<sup>40</sup> According to Turkish law, foreign film producers, directors and companies who want to shoot a film (a documentary, motion picture, TV film, TV series, TV program, short film, video clip or advertisement) in Turkey have to apply to the Directorate General of Cinema under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to obtain a film permit.

always present in subsequent first-person documentaries by post-exilic Armenian films. However, given the relatively more open socio-political context of 2000s, the Armenian identity of the filmmakers is no longer hidden, which plays a key role in driving the dynamic of the interactions between the filmmakers and the locals.

### *The Current Wave of Post-Exilic Armenian “Homecoming” Films*

Under the relatively more stable and secure climate of 2000s in Turkey, an increasing number of Armenian diasporic filmmakers began to make their “return” journeys. Changing socio-economic and cinematic conditions have helped these filmmakers break an important taboo about “homecoming” journeys to their ancestral homeland following a century-old multigenerational exile. Up to this point, and as discussed above, almost all fiction and non-fiction films on the Armenian Genocide were made at a significant geographic distance from the ancestral homeland, the origin of the trauma of 1915. Since 2005, more than twenty personal documentaries have been made by post-exilic Armenians. This new emerging school of personal, autobiographical and subjective filmmaking revolves around filmmakers’ familial ties, modern day Armenian communities and heritage, and/or Turkey at large as a human and physical memory site scarred by a violent and traumatic Armenian history.

Some of the best known titles of these increasingly growing documentaries are: *Land of our Grandparents* (2006) by Dutch/Armenian Alexander Goekjian; *Genocide in Me* (2006) by Canadian/Armenian Araz Artinian; *We Drank the Same Water* (2007) by French/ Armenian Serge Avedikian; *An Armenian Homecoming* (2008) by British/Armenian Ani King-Underwood; *Voyage to Amasia* (2011) by American/Armenian Eric V. Hachikian; *The Son of the Olive Merchant* (2011) by

French/Armenian Mathieu Zeitindjioglou; *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul* (2013) by Syrian/Armenian Nigol Bezjian. With the hundredth anniversary of the genocide, there was a significant increase in the number of such cinematic homecoming journeys. In 2015 alone at least five films were produced by Armenian post-exilic filmmakers depicting their emotional return journeys through documentaries, which include: *Journey to the Homeland* (2015) by American/ Armenian Nora Hovsepien; *Back To Gürün* (2015) by Armenian director from Yerevan Adrineh Gregorian; *Stony Paths* (2015) by French/Armenian Arnaud Khayadjanian, *The Other Side of Home* (2015) by American/Armenian Naré Mkrtchyan.<sup>41</sup>

Most of these post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” documentaries include many formal elements of fiction films such as reenactments, staging, dramatizing past family stories through animation and clearly blur the line between fiction and documentary. However, the indexical quality of the films as records of the directors’ personal journey is what distinguishes them and helps create new cinematic postmemorial works which document the difficult act of postexilic return. These small crew and low-budget independent films that began to fill a particular void have been received with growing interest in a number of Armenian film festivals, community events and university screenings across the diaspora, in Armenia and in Turkey.

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<sup>41</sup> Even though it is directed by a Dutch filmmaker, Kees Schaap’s 6 episode mini Dutch TV Series *Bloodbrothers* (2015) about the journey of Dutch-Turkish journalist Sinan Can and Dutch-Armenian Ara Halici to Anatolia and Armenia can also be considered as part of this new emerging Armenian post-exilic “homecoming” documentaries. Another example of this variation is the Dutch filmmaker Dorothee Forma’s 2006 documentary *The Story of my Name, An Armenian Tale* which follows the voyage of Dutch-Armenian school teacher Alex Peltekian to his father’s town in Anatolia. There is also a short film made by Turkish director Mehmet Binay, *Talking Pictures* (2009) that documents the journey of Armenian-American Ghazaros Kerjilian’s return to his paternal hometown Geben, Turkey and his search for his lost great uncle in 1915.

As evident in their titles, the common themes in these documentaries are journeying, family and homeland, and traumatic postmemory. While references to “homecoming” “journey” and “voyage” in the titles highlight the journeying and inherent mobility of the films, titles such as *Land of our Grandparents*, *The Son of the Olive Merchant*, *We Drank the Same Water*, *The Story of my Name*, *An Armenian Tale* point at homeland and family as the main preoccupation of these journeys. Titles such as *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul*, *We Drank the Same Water*, and *Bloodbrothers* on the other hand refer to the traumatic and complicated relationship with the homeland and its present day residents.

In the next two chapters, I focus on three of these films: *We Drank the Same Water*; *The Son of the Olive Merchant*; and *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul*; I conduct close textual analyses in order to illustrate and support my overall analysis of how post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films are structured as variations of accented films and how they fill a void in the cinematic representation of the Armenian Genocide while also experimenting with working-through the 1915 trauma. The historical background I have outlined above grounds my entire analysis, as the historical, social and political factors surrounding the recognition and the denial of the Armenian Genocide continue to influence not only the national and international actors, but also people’s everyday lives, and their artistic expressions and cinematic representations.

## Chapter 2 - Accented Post-Exilic Armenian Filmmakers and Their “Homecoming” Films

Starting in the early 2000s a growing number of Armenian filmmakers from the diaspora began to travel to Turkey to make documentaries about their visit and their interactions with the locals. I have referred to this group of filmmakers and their films as “post-exilic Armenian filmmakers” and “post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films”, respectively.

My argument in this chapter is twofold. First, I argue that these films, closely shaped by directorial biographies, are best understood first and foremost from within the accented cinema theory (Naficy); but due to the filmmakers’ multigenerational distant relationship with the homeland, these films also need to be considered within the framework of the post-exilic identity paradigm (Hogikyan). However, I also show that the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films challenge and expand these two theoretical frameworks through the directors’ return journeys, documented despite their ambivalent relationship to the ancestral homeland, their traumatic postmemory condition, and the ongoing Turkish state denial of the Armenian Genocide. Secondly, I argue that the journey documentaries produced by post-exilic filmmakers have four key essential defining aesthetic elements. I show that these elements, constitutive of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films, are variations on some of the key stylistic features of accented cinema; and that these variations are indispensable due to the historicity of the directors’ subject positions and relationship with the diaspora, and the uneasiness of their journey.

In this chapter, I first introduce the three post-exilic Armenian “homecoming”

films selected for close examination. I then discuss how the post-exilic Armenian films can be understood from within existing theories, mainly Naficy's accented cinema and Hogikyan's post-exilic identity paradigm, and how these films expand these theoretical frameworks. Next, I provide a brief overview of the post-exilic and transnational biographies of the three filmmakers, before I turn my attention to the four defining aesthetic elements of the post-exilic Armenian "homecoming films" which I discuss in terms of their alignment with and variations from some of the parameters of Naficy's accented cinema.

## Introducing the three Films and Directors

### *We Drank the Same Water*

*We Drank the Same Water* (2007) is a 72 min documentary that contains three successive personal journeys of discovery by Serge Avédikian, undertaken between 1987 and 2005 from Paris to Sölöz<sup>42</sup>, Bursa in northwestern Turkey, where his grandparents lived up until 1915. In order to contextualize his family's history, deportation and ordeals, Avédikian uses selected archival photographs, newsreel footage, historical maps, his own family photos, and his own first person voice-over narration (VON). The film also contains a segment with Avédikian's grandfather Avedis' voice recording of his life story and escape from Turkey, and a black and white archival intimate interview Avédikian had previously made with Zartar Boyadjan, an Armenian survivor also from Sölöz. *We Drank the Same Water* primarily investigates and traces Avédikian's own ancestral roots and the town's Armenian heritage based on his postmemory of the pre-

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<sup>42</sup> The current name of the town is Yeni Sölöz (New Sölöz).

1915 Sölöz and through his engagement with the new inhabitants of the town<sup>43</sup>. The film was screened in many prestigious festivals such as the Yerevan Golden Apricot International Film Festival (2006), the Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM) (2007), the Geneva International Human Rights Film Festival (2007), and La Rochelle International Film Festival (2007). It was also screened in Istanbul during the 1001 Istanbul International Documentary Film Festival (2008) and in Sölöz to Turkish and Armenian audiences.

Best known for his Cannes Prize winner 2010 short animation *Barking Island*, Serge Avédikian, the director of *We Drank the Same Water*, is a French Armenian actor, producer, stage director, writer and filmmaker of about 20 films comprising shorts and feature films, animations and documentaries. As a multi-talented artist he became one of the most recognizable faces of Armenian cinema with subject matters often related to the Armenian diaspora, the genocide, its memory and denial. He has come “to epitomize the wealth of the Armenian theatrical world. A master of all mediums – stage, television and film” (Yegavian 2015). Born and raised in Yerevan, Armenia with French-Armenian parents, Avédikian has been living and producing films mainly in Paris, France. With his advance knowledge of multiple languages and cultures (Armenian, French and Russian) and experience in working and producing in many countries, he is a typical accented filmmaker.

### **The Son of the Olive Merchant**

*The Son of the Olive Merchant* (2011) by Mathieu Zeitindjioglou is a 77-minute award winning film that mainly chronicles Zeitindjioglou and his Polish wife Anna’s

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<sup>43</sup> The new residents of Sölöz are displaced Pomaks, an ethnic Muslim minority originally from Greece and Bulgaria, known officially as Bulgarian Muslims, who migrated to Turkey as a result of population exchange policies of 1923.

honeymoon to Turkey, their search for the origins of the director's Armenian heritage and the denial of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>44</sup> Born and raised in France, Zeitindjioglou inherited his Turkified last name from his genocide survivor grandfather, which inescapably ties him to Turkey where the newlywed couple travels by engaging everyday people they meet on the road about the genocide and the "Armenian issue". As in *We Drank the Same Water*, in addition to the journeying footage, the film uses supplementary archival materials such as newsreel footage, photos and maps, an archival interview of Raphael Lemkin, and French philosopher and author Bernard-Henri Levy's speech<sup>45</sup> at the French Parliament in 2007 against the denial. The film also includes expert testimonies by historians and academics, including one by Seyfettin Gürsel who categorically denies that what happened in 1915 was genocide. The travelogue part of the film is mainly narrated based on Anna's personal diary which helps establish the subjective and intimate tone of the film. As a pilgrimage to Armenian heritage sites<sup>46</sup>, the film tackles head-on the ignorance and denial associated with the genocide. Also, a distinguishing feature of the film is the three original animation sequences by Zeitindjioglou. This fictionalized family history, partially based on Zeitindjioglou's grandfather's survival story transmitted through his father, is a personal visual commentary on the Armenian Genocide and its multilayered denial. The fable-like animations sequences are narrated by famous French actor Jean-Claude Dreyfus, and while they represent Turks as bloodthirsty sly wolves, they characterize the director and

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<sup>44</sup> Some of the awards the film won include the Best Documentary award at the Pomegranate Film Festival in Toronto in 2011, the "Special Jury Prize" at the International Reanimania Animated Film Festival, 2011, and "Honorable Mention" at the Los Angeles Film Festival 2011.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH6o0V7nOLU>

<sup>46</sup> Sites such as the ancient cities of Ani, Erzurum, and Van with significant historical significance for Armenians are practically indiscernible for most residents of Turkey in terms of their relationship to Armenian heritage.

his family as sheep in wolf-skin passing as wolfs to avoid the slaughter. Reflecting the history behind the director's family name "Zeitindjioglou", these creative segments are also another powerful contribution of the filmmaker in terms of fictionalization of the traumatic postmemory and its working-through process through animation.

French-Armenian award winning director, editor, painter and art director Mathieu Zeitindjioglou, the maker of *The Son of the Olive Merchant*, was born and raised in Paris. He studied economics and finance before launching his carrier as a multi-talented artist and filmmaker. He created his own production company to co-direct and to produce a documentary in Mongolia about the challenges faced by nomads. Later on he focused on directing his own short and feature length movies, advertisements, documentaries, reports and experimental films. He has recently edited Nicolas Jallot's 2015 documentary *Armenian Genocide, 100 Years After / Génocide Arménien, le spectre de 1915* and is working on a new documentary *Burn in Love (2016)*, again depicting a road trip with his wife Anna, this time to India, that also mixes animation, fiction and documentary.

### **I Left My Shoes in Istanbul**

The third film I examine is *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul* (2013), a 64 min documentary by Syrian-Armenian Nigol Bezjian who, instead of filming his own journey, documents the journey of Lebanese-Armenian poet Sako Arian, another third generation descendant of an exiled Armenian family like Bezjian himself, who sets out to explore the Armenian cultural and literary heritage. Prior to making *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*, Bezjian took his first trip to Istanbul in 2011. On his return to Beirut, he approached Arian who had never been to Turkey to document the emotional and mental impact of his return journey (Bezjian, Interview with Nigol Bezjian on *I left My Shoes in*

*Istanbul* 2016). The resulting film takes the viewers to the old streets of Istanbul, once populated by Armenians, to ancient Armenian cemeteries where famous national Armenian poets, writers, and musicians are buried, to isolated churches and to a century-old Armenian high school. While the film explores everyday life in the Armenian community through observational shots, the camera follows Arian and captures his first impressions of Istanbul and also its fading, but once vibrant, Armenian culture. Unlike the other two films, Bezjian does not use archival photos, documents or maps. Constructed mainly by observational and neatly framed shots of Bezjian's camera, reminiscent of direct cinema tradition, the film does not include any voice over narration either. His conversations with people from the Turkish and Armenian communities are the main focus of his film. Screened in more than 40 different cities all around the world including Turkey and Canada, *I left My Shoes in Istanbul* is distinct in terms of its focus on the Armenian community in Istanbul.

Nigol Bezjian, the director of *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul* is a Syrian-Armenian award winning filmmaker. His awards include the 2015 Venice Biennale Golden Lion award for Best National Participation. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Cinema Studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and then further pursued his passion for filmmaking at the UCLA School of Film, Theatre and Television. Living and working between Lebanon and the USA, Bezjian is a post-exilic figure whose life and formation is heavily influenced by Armenian culture and heritage, and the legacy of the genocide. Having migrated from east to west and back to east, he is an accented filmmaker whose cinema carries the impact of dislocation, deterritorialization and immigration. One of his best-known feature films *Chickpeas* was released in 1992 and

earned several awards. The film deals with identity and the cultural issues of three young Armenian refugees who fled Beirut for the USA. Bezjian is the director of almost 20 short and full length feature and documentary essay films, mostly poetic expressions of the rich Armenian culture, literature, history and traditions.

Given these directors' deterritorialised and diasporic identities, the accented cinema framework is the most appropriate conceptual approach to the above three journey documentaries and to the larger group of post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films. The filmmakers' generational distance from their grandparents' exile and the original trauma of the 1915 requires however the expansion of Naficy's framework by considering these films through Hogikyan's post-exilic analytical lens. In the next section, before examining the post-exilic biographical trajectory of each filmmaker, I will discuss the key elements associated with the accented, exilic, and post-exilic filmmakers and their films towards a fuller conceptualization.

### **Accented, Exilic, and Post-Exilic**

In his 2001 book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy formulates the concept of "accented cinema" as an emerging category of films by exilic and diasporic filmmakers. According to Naficy, films that constitute accented cinema are made by deterritorialised filmmakers, first or later generations from the global south, mainly living in cosmopolitan centers in North America and Europe. Such productions are mostly independent transnational films with significant commonalities in terms of their thematic preoccupations, formal aspects as well as their modes of production, distribution and reception. The "accent" does not only refer to the accented speech of the characters in these films, but also refers to the displacement of the

filmmakers and the artisanal modes of production<sup>47</sup>. Also, accented films are heavily shaped by their directors' personal and family histories reflecting their unique stylistic signatures. The distinctive perspective of accented filmmakers as creative artists mainly originates from "their (dis)location as interstitial subjects within social formations and cinematic practices" (Naficy 2001, 34).

Naficy identifies three types of filmmakers, three fluid subject positions that may overlap and transform into each other, within the accented cinema tradition: exilic, diasporic and post-colonial ethnic and identity filmmakers. *Exilic* refers to people who have left their country of origin, voluntarily or involuntarily, and "maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures" (12). *Diasporic* refers to dispersed and displaced peoples who may have been driven from their original homeland by different motivating factors, but unlike exile, *diaspora* is "necessarily collective, in both its origination and its destination" (14). Both the *exilic* and the *diasporic* often involve trauma, rupture and coercion, and result in the scattering of populations to places outside their original homeland. *Postcolonial ethnic and identity* filmmakers are defined on the other hand by their focus on the continuing struggle of the hyphenated ethnic community towards claiming an equal footing in the host community. As such, the concepts of the exilic, the diasporic and the ethnic are best distinguished in terms of where they place their primary focus: respectively, on the "there and then" in the homeland; at the same time on the homeland and on the sister diaspora communities elsewhere in the world; and on the exigencies of life here and now in the host country.

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<sup>47</sup> Post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films also adopt an artisanal mode of production, which is not examined in detail in this study.

Post-exilic Armenian filmmakers like Avédikian, Bezjian and Zeitindjioglou exhibit a unique blend of the two types of exilic and diasporic accented identities. As members of the politically active and tightly organized Armenian diaspora, they enjoy a collective and globally interconnected diasporic identity. At the same time, they continue to maintain an ambivalent relationship with their ancestral homeland. However, situating these filmmakers strictly within the framework of accented films is further complicated by their generational and cultural distance from the exodus. Although the filmmakers and their films display exilic and diasporic characteristics, the filmmakers do not have a homeland per se they can historically identify with. Instead, they relate to their ancestral homeland, mediated through their postmemory transmitted by the first generation exiles, which is also the place of trauma and origin of displacement. In this respect, these filmmakers are in fact post-exilic precisely in the way Hogikyan defines the second and third post-genocide Armenian generations, a subject position that is neither defined nor developed within the accented cinema framework.

Hogikyan expands Naficy's framework by introducing the concept of "post-exile" which she illustrates by mainly examining two of Atom Egoyan's films, *Calendar* (1993) and *Ararat* (2002), particularly in terms of their representation of post-exilic relationship to "homeland and origin" (Hogikyan 2007, 193). She argues that generational diasporic differences matter because "the experiences of the generations after exile announce new histories of migration and diaspora" (194). Hogikyan's "post-exile" posits a deeper sense of distance from the origin that significantly differs from the exilic experiences of nostalgia, ethnicity, and nation developed by Naficy as part of his framing of the exilic identity in accented cinema.

Hogikyan's "identity paradigm of post-exile" results in a concept of post-exilic identity as post-national, post-ethnic, and post-nostalgia, which also replaces the lost homeland with the lost family: "In the absence of the permanence of connections, as distances grow larger between individuals and peoples, and in the absence of continuity of filiation due to migration, immediate family becomes the only possible imagined community" (196). The core difference between the two types of exile, the exilic and the post-exilic, according to Hogikyan is the likely estrangement of the post-exile from his/her own origin. The post-exile has no homeland to identify with: home is neither the place where the earlier generations have come from nor the place where the post-exilic live; as a result, their immediate and extended family becomes their home. According to Hogikyan: "Beyond roots, beyond land, beyond borders, post-exile is a condition of that which is beyond the exilic preoccupation with national boundaries. The post-exilic subject can say, "I have many countries, they are not mine" (196).

Hogikyan's post-exilic identity paradigm based on her analysis of the life and works of Egoyan is well aligned with other third generation Armenian filmmakers, especially those embarking on the "return" journeys to Turkey. However, the relationship of these post-exilic filmmakers with their ancestral homeland is more complex than suggested by Hogikyan who argues that the post-exilic accepts "an identity politics that is no longer based on identification with a homeland—and especially not with an ancestral homeland" (196). Even though the family is home for these post-exilic Armenian filmmakers, because of their close family connections and the transmitted stories of trauma, they maintain a lasting undecided interest in their ancestral homeland. Their traumatic and familial still vibrant postmemory associated with this distant and estranged

homeland motivates their return journeys, despite the continuing denial of the Armenian Genocide. Precisely because the lost homeland has been replaced by the lost family, which plays a key role in the formation of the post-exilic identity through its mediation of the transmitted trauma, and contrary to what Hogikyan suggests, the ancestral homeland becomes an inevitable place of return. To make sense of their trauma and to develop a narrative of their own familial and cultural origins, post-exilic Armenian filmmakers are drawn to their ancestral homeland, historically deemed off-limits.

As Naficy suggests, “any discussion of authorship in exile needs to take into consideration not only the individuality, originality and personality of unique individuals as expressive film authors, but also, and more importantly, their (dis)location as interstitial subjects within social formations and cinematic practices” (Naficy 2001, 3). As the grandchildren of displaced survivors, Avédikian, Zeitindjioglou and Bezjian, grew up with their grandparents’ deportation stories and have themselves led transnational lives across several borders and cultures. Their accented and post-exilic biographical trajectories are significant not only in motivating their return journey, but also the thematic and aesthetic preoccupations of their documentaries.

### **Post-Exilic Biographical Trajectories**

The transnational biographies of the three filmmakers discussed below, reveal a post-exilic and post-national identity with ties to Turkey through multigenerational familial, historical and cultural connections. This particular post-exilic and post-traumatic subject position which they share with other post-exilic directors shapes their documentaries along similar pathways. As I demonstrate throughout this study, it is this particular subject position that also motivates and enables the post-exilic documentaries

to overcome the repetitive representation of the trauma of 1915. In fact, these films are in themselves an attempted escape from melancholia through a daring act of personal and familial search for new meanings, as I will argue later in Chapter 3. I will now briefly sketch out the post-exilic biographical trajectories of Avédikian, Zeitindjioglou and Bezjian that motivate their “homecoming” journeys and inform their approach to the documentaries they produce.

Avédikian’s maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather were both genocide survivors from Anatolia. His maternal grandmother Alice Tateossian was born in Sivas in Central Anatolia in 1914. She was the only survivor from her family who escaped in 1922 with the help of missionaries, first to Greece and then to Paris. Avédikian’s paternal grandfather Avedis on the other hand was born in 1900 in Sölöz, Bursa, in northwestern Turkey where Avédikian returned 87 years later to film *We Drank the Same Water*. Early in the film, we hear Avedis’ forced deportation story in his own recorded voice layered over his family photos. Through this voice over, we find out that he was forced to move to Konya and how, with the help of the righteous mayor of the city, he managed to flee to Europe. Avedis ended up in Bulgaria, where he got married and where Avédikian’s father was born, before the whole family moved to France. As for Serge Avédikian, he was born in Yerevan to second-generation exilic parents born in France and Bulgaria. Avédikian grew up in Armenia and France, is fluent in Russian, Armenian, and French, with strong attachment to French and Armenian cultures: “Immigration is a culture, and the real culture of the immigrant is integration. But I do not want to be a flag bearer; I do not display my Armenianness on my shoulders. I just carry the duality in me. I have long felt stateless. Today I do not care” (Avedikian, Realisateur 2016).

Mathieu Zeitindjioglou's paternal grandfather Garabet was born at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Keskin, a small town in central Anatolia. He later turkified his last name from Zeytinciyan to Zeytincioglu<sup>48</sup> which means "son of olive merchant," to improve his sales and also to blend in in order to avoid deportation. His new last name helped Garabet escape to France where he had to francisize his name, which he was allowed to change into "Zeitindjioglou", but not to its original version "Zeytinciyan". Filmmaker Mathieu Zeitindjioglou who was born in Paris grew up loving and hating his last name at once: "So I have inherited this name [a turkified Armenian last name] twisted by history like a malediction" (M. Zeitindjioglou 2016). As he grew up hearing from his father and uncles about his grandfather's escape from Anatolia, he developed a keen interest in his family name and eventually pursued its origins and traumatic history through his film. "I'm proud to keep my name as a proof of the genocide" says Zeitindjioglou, referring to himself as "a man from everywhere" (M. Zeitindjioglou 2016).

"In fact, I have never met my grandfather... I inherited his Turkified name, a kind of a scar bound to the Armenian Genocide, but without receiving the Armenian cultural heritage. The movie is the real revenge, the way of asserting my identity, built around this name, to exorcise this kind of curse which struck all my paternal family (abandonment, fratricide, madness)" (M. A. Zeitindjioglou 2011).

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<sup>48</sup> "Most Armenian names end in "ian" or "yan, "meaning the "son of". So for example, just like "Peterson" means "son of Peter" in English, Petrosian or Bedrosian would mean the same exact thing, since Petros/Bedros means Peter in Armenian, and -ian at the end means the same as son. Some diaspora Armenians have changed these endings to blend in their host societies. Today in Turkey "oğlu" often replaces "ian," while Russian Armenians may change the endings to "ov"; e.g., Garry Kasparov, Sergei Parajanov." [http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Armenian\\_Last\\_Names](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Armenian_Last_Names)

Coincidentally, Mathieu's wife Anna Zeitindjioglou who narrates *The Son of the Olive Merchant* also has a diasporic transnational identity -- born in Poland, she moved to Canada as a political refugee, and eventually settled in Paris.

The maternal and paternal grandmothers of Nigol Bezjian, the director of *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul*, were both survivors of deportations to Syria in 1915. His maternal grandmother Zabel, who was originally from Sivas in central Anatolia, managed to reach Aleppo as a 5 year-old girl, having lost most of her family on the way. Bezjian remembers both of his grandmothers having very strong influence on his life, including teaching him Turkish and sharing their traumatic survival stories.

“Words I have heard for most of my life from my grandparents, their friends, the genocide survivors I had interviewed, read about in history books and memoirs, seen in plenty of black and white photographs. I have heard many first-hand accounts about how people were killed and how they were orphaned, my grandparents among them. Stories of starvation, hunger, desperation—and most of all miraculous tales of survival and revival—were the stories in place of our children's books...” (Bezjian, *My School...* 2016).

Bezjian was born in Syria, growing up between Aleppo and Beirut (Lebanon) in a traditional Armenian household and a multicultural environment surrounded with Arab friends before moving to the USA with his family. “I have not been aware of belonging to any single nationality. I grew up speaking several languages and in many different cultures at the same time. Yet by birth, I am Syrian, and at the moment I have dual citizenship. I have worked and lived in many countries, made films in dozens of languages and I have traveled so much” (Bezjian 2016).

## Four Essential Features

These biographies, intertwined with the stories of deterritorialised survivors, including Avedis Avédikian, Garabet Zeitindjioglou, and Zabel Bezjian, highly shape the sensibilities of the filmmakers. The documentaries by Avédikian, Zeitindjioglou, and Bezjian and over two dozen other post-exilic Armenian directors exhibit most of the accented cinema characteristics such as ‘interstitial’ (between Hollywood and independent cinema) and ‘collective’ (community based) modes of production, multilingual narratives, and political preoccupations. However, the four stylistic features of accented cinema - the autobiographical, journeying, the special role of chronotopes, and epistolarity - are crucial for delineating and understanding the distinct thematic preoccupations, narrative structure, and visual forms of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films. Because of the history of the Armenian Genocide, including its continuing denial, the significant role of the diaspora and its traumatic postmemory, these films adopt and expand these four stylistic features of accented cinema, which sets them apart from the ensemble of accented films. In this respect, this newly emerging group of films are not only autobiographical as most accented films, but they are also highly personal, subjective, and typically familial; teeming with mobility, they are “homecoming” journey documentaries of an atypical “return” to an ancestral homeland; they create a dynamic set of time and space configurations (chronotopes) that overlay the trauma of 1915 with today’s physical and human landscapes in Turkey; and, they essentially function as “letter films” addressed to post-exilic diasporic audiences. In the rest of this chapter, I analyze these four key constitutive elements of the distinct accented

aesthetics of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films in the context of the three films introduced above.

### **Personal, Subjective, and Familial**

Accented cinema emphasizes the autobiographical aspect of the accented films as they reflect the life experiences of the filmmakers in both home and host countries.

Within the accented cinema framework, the autobiographical refers not necessarily to the subject matter of the films but to the fact that the border-crossing transitional biography, history, and subjectivity of the filmmaker permeates the film’s deep structure, “its narrative, visual style, characters, subject matter, theme and plot” (23). As accented filmmakers, post-exilic Armenian filmmakers’ biographies play a determining role in terms of the overall structure of their “homecoming” journey films, rendering them autographical in Naficy’s sense. More importantly, however, these films are deeply personal, subjective and familial with a strongly collective diasporic dimension.

The emergence of post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films coincides with the rise of identity politics, diaspora studies, and also a wider availability of new and advanced quality technologies such as digital video (Renov 2004) (Rascaroli 2009). Associated with these changes, there has been an increasing public interest in personal accounts, memoirs and diaries both in literature and other arts, especially by minorities, diasporic and accented subjects as argued by Laura Rascaroli and others like Bill Nichols (Nichols 2010, 4) who point to the increasing orientation of documentary films toward subjectivity and uncertainty.

Unlike the great majority of earlier expository documentaries made about the Armenian Genocide, post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” journey films are personal and

unapologetically subjective, and as such, they are less didactic and fact based. Rascaroli argues that such personal and often autobiographical and reflective documentaries “strongly articulate a subjective personal point of view” (Rascaroli 2009). They construct their spectatorship through a distinct rhetorical structure grounded in their subjective viewpoint shared simultaneously by the filmmaker and the audience. Furthermore, Alisa Lebow emphasizes how intimately and intricately “I” and “we” are intertwined in personal films. She underlines the fact that such documentaries are driven by a sense of the “I” that is “always social, always already in relation, and when it speaks, as these filmmakers do, in the first person, it may appear to be in first person singular ‘I’ but ontologically speaking, it is in effect, the first person plural ‘we’ ” (Lebow 2012, 3).

Such films, Lebow argues, have a significant potential to address a broader audience and may have greater political relevance mainly through effectively engaging interested collectivities and individual spectators by creating a “shared space of embodied subjectivity” (Lebow 2013, 258). As a result, authorship of such documentaries is often shared by the filmmaker and others with whom she shares an inextricably entangled context, historical, social and political. This particular positioning of the filmmaker is also aligned with Nichols’ analysis of “I (or we) speak about us to you” (A. Lebow 2012, 65) as an alternative type of relationship between the filmmaker, social actors and the audience. In the case of post-exilic “homecoming” Armenian films, the first person singular “I” is unquestionably about a collective “we” that refers primarily to a multigenerational and global post-exilic Armenian diaspora, and perhaps also to a larger “we” that includes victims, survivors, and witnesses of past and recent genocides.

Avédikian's *We Drank the Same Water* is predominantly autobiographical using first person narration like most other post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films. He uses limited archival materials and historical references only to contextualize his own family story and the town's history. As both the narrator and the main character of the film, Avédikian is often in front of the camera. Through his VONs, commentaries, and especially his engagement and interviews with the locals of the town, he expresses and readily shares his personal views on his family's story which is inextricably intertwined with the history of the Armenian diaspora. At the beginning of the film, as we see the idyllic still image of Sölöz, Avédikian's VON elaborates:

*My family shares the history of most Ottoman Empire Armenians who survived the 1915 genocide. This tragedy brought an end to their secular presence on their lands and survivors were scattered around, worldwide. My grandfather's history began in the early years of 20th century, in a complex historical context.*

*We Drank the Same Water* is also highly self-reflexive which further brings out the filmmaker's personal attachment to the film. The documentary includes Avédikian's accounts and emotions regarding the steps and challenges involved in the filming process, including the difficulties he faces with some of the locals, and also how each trip individually becomes part of a larger story and contributes towards the making of the entire film.

In contrast, Zeitindjioglou makes more use of archival materials peppered throughout the film, such as newsreels, photographs, and maps, and also interview segments with experts. However, the film remains essentially personal and autobiographical both in terms of its main motivation and its narration that repeatedly returns to the director's long family name and the story behind it as a "malediction". While a devoted camera constantly follows Anna, her direct address to the audience sets

her as the narrator of the film. Yet, the director remains the voice of the documentary<sup>49</sup>, as the point of view of the camera replacing Mathieu allows the spectator to identify with his subjective position as he underscores the Turkish denial of the genocide through his camera, interviews, editing, use of archival materials, and animation segments. What further accentuates the personal and familial aspect of the film is also the central role played by Anna in front of the camera as she candidly exposes the intimacy of her relationship with Zeitindjioglou, including their wedding and honeymoon adventures.

Moreover, as in *We Drank the Same Water*, the fundamental relationship between the personal and the diasporic collective is emphasized throughout the film, particularly through the animation segments which presents Zeitindjioglou's family in relation with the larger Armenian community and the genocide story:

*...when arriving home, Garabet finds his village destroyed, shattered and emptied, no doubt by wolves angry and famished. Dressed in his wolf skin, he travels the empire through and through, a helpless witness to the slaughtering of his blood brothers driven by the wolves like herds of sheep to their final destination.*

Even though there is no first-person narration in *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*, the observational documentary style enables the viewer to join Arian in a highly personal return journey to Turkey. For example, in the dialogue below between Arian and his friend in Beirut before his departure to Istanbul, Arian expresses a deeply held fear rooted in his still open "wound" caused by the transmitted trauma of 1915.

*Friend: Are you fearful?*

*Arian: Is it fear perhaps? Evading? Why fear? What's in me? There is something in me that is preventing me from going.*

*Friend: Naturally being an Armenian you do have a certain thing... There is an issue, there is a wound...*

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<sup>49</sup> According to Bill Nichols, voice in documentary does not only come from "the spoken words" in the film. It also "speaks through its composition of shots, its editing together of images, and its use of music, among other things" (Nichols 2010, 67).

Arian: *That wound is inside me preventing me at every step from deciding to go  
But now I have reached a point where I have to decide, to go or not to go!*  
Friend: *You have to go by any means, for the sake of your wounds.*

In addition to Arian's anxiety about going to and being in Turkey, the film also depicts how he immerses himself in Istanbul's Armenian history and culture towards healing his wounds.

Given their post-exilic identities and the central role family plays for these filmmakers (Hogikyan 2007), the personal is primarily, if not always, familial, as evident in most of the above illustrations. While Avédikian returns to his grandfather's village to show the Armenian life before 1915 (Avedikian, *We Drank The Same Water* - Bonus Commentaries 2007), Zeitindjioglou is lured to Turkey by his family name wherein the traumatic past is intertwined with the familial. As for Bezjian's film, even though Arian's family is not at the center of the narrative, Bezjian and Arian engage with the city mainly through their intimate interactions with the well-known Armenian Tovmasian family as a substitute for the community at large as an extended family. The significance of the familial as the motivation behind most post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films as a vehicle of self-examination is highlighted by Renov as part of his discussion of domestic ethnography in the context of autobiographical and subjective documentaries. The distinguishing element of this approach is a view of personal, autobiographical documentaries where "the self is bound up with its familial other, takes as its unspoken precept "ethnography begins at home". Self entails the other; the Other refracts self" (Renov 2004, xiii). Although they are first-person documentaries, the narratives of post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films, are always relational and inextricably intertwined with familial histories.

With a reoccurring trajectory towards familial roots in Turkey, these films always revolve around familial connections, and often start with a family member's photo, a home video, a painting, a last name, or a trace of Armenian heritage that inspires the journey. *We Drank the Same Water* starts with Avédikian's introduction of the family album of his grandfather and his deportation story in Avedis' own voice. Avédikian's main motivation for his journey is evident in his recurring references to his grandfather:

*My grandfather Avedis always told me (of) poems written on tombstones of Sölöz... My grandfather was always talking about the taste of the Sölöz's olives.*

*The Son of the Olive Merchant* on the other hand starts with an allegorical animation of Mathieu's grandfather's story. Central to the film is also Zeitindjioglou's relationship with his wife Anna who is keen to understand the story of her husband's, now her, last name. As for *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*, the immediate familial relationship is absent on the surface, but it is replaced by the Armenian community as an extended family. Arian's deep personal interest in Istanbul is actually grounded in the city's Armenian communities which, with their rich literary and cultural history, had played a key role in Arian's intellectual and artistic nourishment as a modern day poet.

### **Journeying and Uneasy Homecomings**

The journey and journeying are fundamental concepts used to describe mobility in accented cinema. Even though journeys may take various forms depending on their motivation, and range from exploration to escape, each journey has both direction and duration, and, as such, "transforms space into time" (Naficy 2001, 223). Post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" journey films by definition involve and often revolve around journeys that are, as Naficy suggests, not only physical and territorial, but also psychological and philosophical (6). These physical journeys that are always initiated

from an Armenian diasporic location have Turkey as their destination and have a specific duration. They all, without exception, involve varying degrees of mobility within Turkey, depending on the film's focus and the trajectory of the director. The ensuing mobility is mainly captured through moving hand-held and occasionally shaky camera images, panoramic shots, shots from vehicles, frames that follow the central characters' movements from one location to another and persistent segments of meetings, separations, and visits with locals.

Since the main characters, often the directors themselves are constantly in front of the camera, their own movements remain vital to the films' deep sense of mobility as if their body "becomes a site of inscription of the materiality of the journey and provides a physical anchor for the spatial exploration of the films" (Eleftheriotis 2010, 99). The embedding of the directors' mobility in the journeys is a constant indication of their motivation for seeking new understandings in relation to their postmemory of 1915 and Armenian heritage to offset the denial and missing or destroyed archives.

Avédikian's journey to Istanbul and then to Sölöz in three consecutive trips over a period of sixteen years along with Zeitindjioglou and his wife's journey from Paris throughout Turkey, contain numerous observational shots of the landscape and people, and scenes shot from moving cars, buses and train windows, and boat decks. The notion of mobility in these two films is further enhanced by frequent scenes of bus terminals, ferryboat ports and images of busses, taxis and cars. The reoccurring segments of Avédikian's arrival in the town, and meeting with the same people in subsequent trips years apart, and his farewells emphasize the noticeably circular nature of his trips and the mobility inherent in his film. In *The Son of the Olive Merchant* Mathieu and Anna

Zeitindjioglou relatively cover a much larger geography, without any deep community involvement, unlike Avédikian's, and with an underlying honeymoon agenda, all of which contribute to a sense of mobility that is often seen in a travelogue<sup>50</sup> through an exotic land.

In *I Left my Shoes in Istanbul*, motivated by the idea of visiting the places depicted by Hagop Baronian's *Stroll through the Quarters of the Capital City* (1880), containing literary descriptions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Armenian neighborhoods of Istanbul, Arian takes the viewers on a tour of Armenian cultural sites of Istanbul, such as cemeteries, churches, schools, *Agos* newspaper and Aras<sup>51</sup>. As the camera follows Arian in motion, his gaze and body help the audience experience the centuries-old Armenian cultural presence in the city from a distinctively diasporic perspective. While the stiffness of Arian's body intensifies the feeling of his out-of-placeness and aloofness, possibly due to the emotional impact of the journey, he nevertheless feels at home when he moves through the enduring Armenian cultural and linguistic fabric of the city. The audience moves with Arian both as he changes locations from one neighborhood to another, interacting with the locals and also through the POV shots from Arian's angle, experiencing the space as if through his vision.

Given the direction of their journeys, post-exilic Armenian films should also be conceived as "homecoming" films, though not in the strict sense of Naficy who identifies three main types of exilic journeys in terms of their directionality, *home seeking*,

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<sup>50</sup> Even though some of the post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films may seem to have the characteristics of a travelogue, they are more than "simply a chronicle of events linked by location, personality or theme" (Bruzzi 2006, 83). Instead, they present semi-structured argument with the postmemory of the Armenian Genocide as their coherent thematic.

<sup>51</sup> *Aras* is the most active and best known Armenian publishing company in Turkey.

<http://www.arasyayincilik.com/>

*Agos* is a weekly Armenian-Turkish newspaper. <http://www.agos.com.tr/en/home>

*homelessness*, and *homecoming*. While the typical *home seeking* journey films depict the westward movement from civilization to wilderness or restriction to freedom, journeys of *homelessness* are journeys where the main characters, having lost their homes often due to some traumatic reason, wander around disoriented, anxious and frustrated in despair. The defining factor for the homecoming journey films however is the ultimate “return” that constitutes the “glorious homecoming” without which the exiles would eternally remain as “émigrés, expatriates, refugees, and ethnic subjects” (229).

The return in post-exilic Armenian films, however, unlike the “glorious homecoming” the exile dreams about, is not to an actual home left behind by the exile. In fact, both the exile and the home of the accented cinema are absent in the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films. Nevertheless, this is still a “return” by a post-exilic character to an ancestral homeland imagined through memories transmitted by exilic generations. Even though “the post-exile makes no claim to an ancestral homeland as the sole space of belonging,” (Hogikyan 2007, 195) post-exilic Armenian filmmakers’ familial and cultural ties to Turkey, and the denial they undergo, help determine their homecoming experience which inescapably oscillates between belonging and out-of-placeness. As post-exiles, their strong ties with their families (described by Hogikyan) lure them back to their familial roots where the trauma originates. As in all the other Armenian post-exilic films, the varying nature of this ambivalent and questionable “homecoming” experience is reflected in the three films examined in this study.

Avédikian’s close relationship with his grandfather and his persistent engagement with the locals of Sölöz help give his journey a relatively strong sense of “homecoming”.

*We Drank the Same Water* starts with the following two verses by French poet Yasmina Reza superimposed on the image of Sölöz:

*For there is a hard soil which has been trodden on for years  
And I may have to return to it one day, if I am strong and daring enough.*

Avédikian's voice over asks as his camera pans over the green mountains surrounding Sölöz:

*Can there be a better echo to my successive trips back to my grandparents' native soil and now its present day Turkey?*

At the beginning of the segment that depicts his first trip to Turkey in 1987 after the contextual and family background sequence, Avédikian states: "This is the first time I can make the trip *back* (my emphasis) to the place Avedis was never able to see again. Here we are in Istanbul, city of all cities, which my grandfather called Bolis." However, the film's initial sense of homecoming is tempered by the denialist approach embedded in the town's culture, which reminds the audience about Avédikian's post-exilic displacement.

In *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*, despite his lack of direct family ties in Turkey and his apprehension about embarking on the journey, Arian initially expresses a noticeable sense of "homecoming". At the very beginning of the film we witness his hesitation about his journey as he talks to a friend in a Beirut apartment:

Friend: *You have to go Sako, it's impossible to not to go. You being diaspora Armenian, how could you not go?*

Arian: *As an Armenian part of me is saying don't go, clenching my hand, but the other side wants to go, to see, to live, to write.*

Friend: *Are you fearful?*

Arian: *Is it fear perhaps? Evading? Why fear? What's in me? There is something in me that is preventing me from going.*

Later in the film when Robert Koptaş, the former chief editor of *Agos* asks Arian if this is his first visit to Istanbul, his response is revealing:

*My first return!*

Arian's instant connection with the Armenian community, which also helps him cross the language barrier, is a key factor in deepening his sense of return and homecoming. However, in the very last sequence of the film, as Sako Arian reflects on his journey in an Istanbul coffeehouse, viewing old historical postcards illustrating Armenian heritage in Turkey, he reads a poem by Bezjian depicting the violent treatment of his ancestors by the Turks, underlining his ambivalent relationship with the city which does not allow him to feel completely at home.

*This is a city that lives with her deceased  
 This is the city that lives with my grief, sadness  
 This is the city that sent my ancestors into killing fields, exiles  
 And burdened me with their heavy memories rooted in centuries.  
 This is the city that wanted my heritage to become dust, but locked my history in  
 her archives  
 This is the city that wanted blood to stop flowing in my veins  
 This is the city that killed the last voice of hope of my remnants  
 This is the city that wants me back in her lap to tell her all this!  
 Give me your harlot ears; I want to whisper news from all corners of the world  
 Where all those you betrayed erected buildings out of huts, tents and sand pebbles  
 And remember you as the city whose breast dripped poison instead of milk  
 Tomorrow I will return to them  
 What should I be telling them?*

In the *Son of the Olive Merchant* the sense of homecoming is absent for several reasons such as Mathieu's lack of family relations in Turkey, his detachment from his grandfather Garabet, and the vanishing Armenian heritage he had hoped to connect with. As he arrives in Garabet's hometown and the camera pans over the grey and depressing landscape of Ankara, Anna's voiceover expresses Mathieu's sense of out-of-placeness in Turkey:

*It is here in the suburbs of Ankara, Garabet Zeytinciyan had become Garabet Zeytincioglu. But both Mathieu and I know we will find nothing about Garabet... Mathieu is silent and gloomy. The city doesn't inspire him. He doesn't say anything. I can feel that he is angry with me that I brought him here and he would like to go back.*

Throughout his journey, Mathieu sees repeated signs of the denial, as most of the people he talks to, with a few exceptions, either deny the genocide, recite the official history or do not want to talk about it at all. This constant refusal and rejection, which affects Mathieu, radically weakens any possible sense of belonging or homecoming. However, his ancestral ties to the land, emblematic in his last name, draw him nevertheless to Turkey almost as a cure, which renders his journey a return to the origins of his malediction.

### **Oscillating Chronotopes**

Naficy builds on Bakhtin's "chronotope" (literally, "time-space") to examine how accented films interlace time and space to explore exilic and diasporic relationships with the original homeland. "As a unit of textual analysis, cinematic chronotopes refer to certain specific temporal and spatial settings in which stories unfold" (Naficy, 152) As such chronotopes facilitate the analysis of how space is transformed into a place with a special meaning, that is essentially also temporal since a place is historically situated. Naficy argues that accented films usually represent the homeland with "open" chronotopes that signify it with boundlessness, timelessness, and continuity. Natural landscapes, mountains, rivers in accented films mostly represent nostalgic longing for the homeland. Life in exile and diaspora on the other hand is depicted by "close" chronotopes which signify claustrophobia, temporality, panic, pursuit and rupture. Naficy also introduces the concept of "third-space" chronotopes which involve transitional and

transnational sites such as borders, tunnels, seaports, airports, hotels and transportation vehicles. Functioning as the ‘organizing centers’ of films, these three types chronotopes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Instead, each accented film may contain “a primary chronotope or multiple mutually inclusive chronotopes, which may reinforce, coexist with, or contradict one another” (154).

Previous fiction and non-fiction films on the Armenian Genocide mostly remain frozen in time either within the traumatic memories of 1915 or the nostalgia of a pre-genocide idyllic ancestral homeland. They represent Turkey mainly as a claustrophobic and violent place of trauma because of their limited ventures to Turkey and the repeated representations of the trauma of the genocide.

With their autobiographical return trajectories from exile to homeland, the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films interlace time and space in novel ways. Contrary to what is often seen in accented films, in the post-exilic Armenian films, it is not the time in exile, but the time in the ancestral homeland that is often initially invested by claustrophobia, fear, and rupture due the inherited trauma, displacement, and the continuing denial of 1915.

The three documentaries examined in this study strive to transform such closed spaces into open spaces, albeit with sporadic and limited success through filmmakers’ negotiation of their own time-space configurations throughout their distinct trajectories and personal interactions with their surroundings. As Naficy also suggests, “connotations of the open, closed, and transitional forms do not reside inherently or permanently in these forms; their significance and meaning must be derived from the contexts in which they are deployed” (155). The locations these filmmakers visit are “a segment of space

that people imbue with special meaning and value” (Naficy 2001, 152). They are never just the ordinary, touristic places, but instead are much more complicated, dense and claustrophobic spaces full with connotations of historical, artistic, familial sites of Armenian heritage which carry the traces of transmitted traumatic memories and the visible signs of ongoing denial and rejection.

The “third-space” chronotopes also play a central role in these films which entail transitional and transnational sites such as borders, tunnels, seaports, airports, hotels and vehicles, as the filmmakers remain essentially in journeying status, itinerants in their ancestral homeland. This is not only because of the natural aesthetics of these road films, but it is also due to constant denial and the filmmakers’ resulting unsettled relationship with and their multigenerational distance to their ancestral homeland.

*We Drank the Same Water* has many scenes in open air captured through long shots and long takes by mobile framing that would typically be associated with open chronotopes, but they remain nevertheless claustrophobic. For example, the film opens with a scenic image of the director’s grandfather’s town shot during his first trip, with the camera showing densely green mountains with a blue sky, an idyllic scene which would be a typical setting for an open chronotope. Yet the solemn Armenian song in the background and Avédikian’s VON immediately reinterprets the space by contextualizing it within the historicity of the Armenian Genocide. The sequence continues with the same tranquil image of the town while Avédikian lists the significant dates and events at end of 19<sup>th</sup> century leading to the genocide.

Again, when Avédikian’s subsequent tracking shots display images of Istanbul, the Bosphorus, mosques and people, these scenes turn into loaded and claustrophobic

images, far from the happy, carefree shots of a travelogue. Even though the camera moves freely exposing scenic places and ordinary people preoccupied with their everyday lives against the background of a bustling city, the previous archival segments of Avedis' and Zartar's stories of trauma, loss and despair project a solemn space. On his way to Sölöz, Avédikian expresses his in-betweenness: "These travellers may descend from the people who they took part in the deporting and killing the Armenians. They seem harmless, tired and solid ... I feel right in this boat that is taking me to the place of my origins."

Over the three consecutive trips in 16 years, Avédikian builds enduring relationships with the locals and creates a more welcoming place for himself in Sölöz. As a result, despite ongoing denial and scattered remnants of the Armenian heritage across Sölöz, as the town becomes more welcoming for Avédikian, the dominant chronotope of the film becomes more open. By the third trip, even though the shots are similar and the people are the same, the context evolves through Avédikian's persistent interactions and search for a dialogue with the town's people about Sölöz's Armenian heritage.

In *The Son of the Olive Merchant*, the homeland is not only depicted as claustrophobic initially, but also as a historically violent space frozen in time. The film overlays the animated cruel "space of wolves" with frequent returns to 1915 and its denial through the couple's recurring questioning of the locals. Even though most of the interviews are made in sunny outdoors, locals' denialist statements time and again and Zeitindjioglou's constant witnessing presence as "the son of the son of the olive

merchant's son"<sup>52</sup>, confines the space and renders it claustrophobic and even menacing for an Armenian audience.

*The Son Of the Olive Merchant* has however segments where the film successfully breaks free from the stronghold of 1915 and opens up relatively more harmonious welcoming spaces, creating momentarily more open chronotopes that reflect a possible but delicate connection to an imagined homeland. For example, the segment that takes place at a young female doctor's house in Erzurum, a conservative city located at the heart of a historically Armenian geography, presents a glance of such a breakthrough. In this encounter, the doctor talks freely about the genocide and its denial, gender roles, polygamy and about being a woman in Turkey. Through their open dialogue, shared laughter, and exchange of highly intimate thoughts, the darkly-lit small apartment becomes a safe open space reminiscent of nostalgic times when possibly Turkish and Armenian people lived together side by side. Another such segment is when Mathieu and Anna interact with a Kurdish community in their trip to Van, also part of a traditionally Armenian region in eastern Turkey. The welcome and the acceptance they receive from the Kurdish people radically transform the dominant closed chronotopes of the film. During the indoor wedding of the Alevi Kurdish<sup>53</sup> couple from Tunceli, the camera strolls around and captures unreservedly the community's joy, while men, women and children, including Anna, dance to a lively traditional Kurdish song. The words of an Alevi woman in her broken English capture best the warm welcome the community extends to Mathieu and his wife: "We are from Tunceli. It is a very, very old city of the Armenians. The

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<sup>52</sup> Throughout the animation segments Mathieu refers to himself as "the son of the son of the olive merchant's son" to underline his connection to genocide and the Turkification of this last name.

<sup>53</sup> Alevi Kurds are a minority group in Turkey who are very well known for their liberal life style, gender equality, higher education levels and more open minded attitude towards the Armenian issue.

people of Tunceli love Armenians so much because they lived together for so long with each other.”

As for *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*, by focusing on the spirited Armenian everyday life in modern day Istanbul and also on its pre-1915 literary world, it introduces an alternative open chronotope that displaces from time to time the claustrophobic closed chronotopes of 1915 genocide and its denial in a city with an open wound.

The film follows Arian as he visits Armenian families and communal spaces such as churches and schools where Armenian language and culture are taught and cherished. Unlike the other two films discussed above, *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul* has no specific segment about the negation of Armenian culture or the denial of the genocide. Sako Arian has several conversations with Armenians and Turks who do consistently acknowledge historical injustices against Armenians and their destructive impact on today's Turkish society. Arian's preoccupation with 19<sup>th</sup> century Armenian writers and poets from Istanbul who continue to be among highly revered Armenian literary figures helps underscore the history of this still vibrant culture. The resulting time and space in the film predominantly privileges modern day Armenian life in Istanbul, a city with deep Armenian roots.

Despite the positive space and time visibly emergent in the film, the closed chronotope of 1915 is nevertheless omnipresent from beginning to end, from his reflections in Beirut whether to go on his journey to the sombre poem Arian reads in the Istanbul café. Throughout the film, dialogues with the members of the Armenian community always allude to the loss and pain caused by 1915 and the resulting fragile existence of the community. Even though there are no direct visual references to the 1915

in the film, Bezjian skillfully creates two parallel time zones; the first one captures the modern day lived, chronological time and enduring Armenian culture, evocative of a relatively open chronotope. The second time-zone points at pre-1915 when a richer Armenian culture existed with world renowned architects, writers, poets, and musicians whose work still nourish the modern day Armenian communities in Istanbul and across the world.

While Arian interacts with the members of the Armenian community moving across the city's cultural, literary, and artistic Armenian heritage sites, the camera almost always pans over nearby details of his surroundings such as cobblestone streets, leaves on trees, aged walls, or a distant image of an ancient structure. During these shots while the diegetic sound of his interactions with the locals, the sounds of chronological time is heard, the accompanying non-diegetic poignant music in the background accentuates the second time-zone, which recalls the traumatic memories of the 1915 and its devastating impact on the Armenian existence. Another recurring series of segments that create confined and sombre spaces involves Arian's repeated visits to Armenian cemeteries where the tombstones of Armenian cultural figures such as Bedros Tourian, Krikor Zohrab and Hrant Dink are reminiscent of the human and cultural loss of 1915.

### Letter Films

The post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films are *letter-films* because they are conceived and produced in essence as audio-visual belated letters addressed primarily to the diaspora from the ancestral homeland, compensating to some extent for the century old silence.

Epistolary is one of the main stylistic signatures of the accented cinema

according to Naficy. Because “both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps” exile and epistolarity are inevitably linked to one another in accented cinema (101). Naficy defines three types of accented epistolary films: *film-letters* that a diegetic character reads or writes; *telephonic epistles* such as telephones or answering machines that a diegetic character uses; and the *letter films* that are produced as a letter to diegetic or non diegetic characters. Epistolarity in general involves the acts and events of sending, receiving, losing, finding, writing and reading letters and other means of communications. Communication methods such as letters, telephone, answering machines are particularly used in accented films to create meaning, distance or absence.

*I Left My Shoes in Istanbul* ends with the poem read by Arian’s non-diegetic voice about Istanbul, the city

... *that wanted my heritage to become dust, but locked my history in her archives.*

In the meantime, Arian is writing postcards made of sepia photos of pre-1915 Armenian life in Anatolia noticeably addressed to Armenians from diaspora from Montreal to Buenos Aires. Even though not all post-exilic Armenian films such scenes of diegetic characters writing or reading letters, their epistolary effect is embedded in the films’ conception and production as letters from ancestral homeland to the diaspora. As such, these letter films, in their search for continuity play a key role in bridging a significant time and cultural gap created by a century old rupture. They are “written” in response to the diaspora’s suppressed and unmet need to know (epistophilia) more about what has happened back “home” and changed since 1915 and to see (scopophilia)<sup>54</sup> the

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<sup>54</sup> According to Naficy, in accented films often “the object of the scopic drive is not solely another person; more often, it is one’s homeland or culture” (Naficy 2001, 122).

homeland. As a result, as postmemorial works, these films end up simultaneously validating and challenging the diaspora's fears and received knowledge about the past and the homeland.

Another key aspect of these letter-films is the fact that they do not only contain their authors' messages, but also the views of the modern day residents of Turkey. Whether it is the museum director categorically denying the genocide or the Kurdish Alevi women confirming their deep-rooted sisterhood with the Armenians in *The Son of the Olive Merchant*, such multiple voices captured through the epistolary form of the films enhance the films' verisimilitude and psychological depth (Naficy 2001, 102). Furthermore, the dialogues between the filmmakers and the locals also create an additional epistolary value for Turkish audiences for whom the diaspora has historically been primarily a hostile and an unknown distant other.

### **Chapter 3 - Working-Through the Traumatic Postmemory of the Armenian Genocide**

As visual memory work, post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films introduce a personally-invested and subjective approach to remembering and representing the trauma of 1915 as an alternative to the historically dominant form of cinematic representation which act out the trauma of the Armenian Genocide. The survivors’ trauma of 1915, transmitted to the later generations, has a significant impact on post-exilic Armenians at personal and cultural levels, which has been intensified by the unrelenting century-old Turkish state denial. Due to the scarcity of archival visual evidence and the denial that it helps bolster, the filmmakers have usually focused on proving the genocide through the non-fiction and depicting its horrors through fiction films. The post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films, however, with their personal and familial approach to memory work make a significant effort to close this visual gap with their unique post-exilic accented aesthetics and through their journeys to the land of original trauma. These films reinvest the traumatic postmemory of the Armenian Genocide with novel images, meanings, and relationships, which are played out through recurring segments of the interplay between denial and acceptance all through these documentaries. As such, the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films circumvent the acting-out of the trauma of 1915 and produce an experiential and aesthetic process towards working-through the multigenerational trauma.

This chapter has two sections. The first one starts with a review of the concept of postmemory before discussing its significance in transmitting the survivors’ trauma to post-genocide Armenian generations. I then discuss the phenomenon of non-existent or

missing archives and the resulting need to produce visual evidence as a key challenge of postmemorial work for a more effective cinematic representation of the Armenian Genocide. Next, based on the three films examined in this study, I show how the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films have begun to fill this critical visual gap after nearly a century-long interruption. In the second section, I first present an overview of the concept of “working-through” (LaCapra) in the context of the Armenian Genocide and explain how these “homecoming” films function towards working-through the 1915 trauma, pointing at the filmmakers’ engagement with the locals, camera work and reflexivity. I then discuss the filmmakers’ critical decision, after a hundred-year rupture, to embark on their “homecoming” journey as a determining initial step that motivates their documentaries and unlocks the working-through process. Finally, through close textual analysis I show how the constant interplay between denial and recognition play a key role in the alternation between the two modes of remembering the trauma, the acting-out and the working-through.

Given the Turkish state’s historical approach to the 1915 events, denial remains the dominant public discourse which renders breaking away from this official view extremely difficult for the Turkish public. As a result, the genocide and its trauma repeat themselves ad infinitum, setting off for the Armenians a continuous process of acting-out their trauma. However, as evidenced in the post-exilic Armenian films, when private Turkish citizens or the civil society acknowledge the genocide, this act of recognition, which is expressed in varying shades and strength, supports the Armenians’ process of working through their postmemory of inherited trauma.

## Armenian Traumatic Postmemory

Postmemory best understood refers to “the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch 2001). It is reproduced and sustained as a result of a particular type of imaginative memory work which is not an act of recall, but which nevertheless defines the present in relation to a received past. With reference to the Holocaust, a highly relevant reference point for the Armenian Genocide, Marianne Hirsch argues that postmemory, as received and transferred knowledge, has been transmuted into history and that the later generations end up acting as guardians of the traumatic past with which they form a living connection (Hirsch 1997 ). The relationship between these reconstructed memories to parental or ancestral past involves what Hirsch calls a syndrome of “belatedness” or “post-ness”. In this respect, the concept of postmemory is most appropriate to understand the trauma Armenians have inherited from the survivors of 1915 and how it affects them.

Postmemory plays a critical role for Armenians for whom it is extremely challenging to generate new images and stories. The particularly traumatic multigenerational postmemory is what mediates the relationship of post-genocide Armenian generations with their ancestors’ traumatic experiences, a point which Shirinian also confirms: “As the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, we are the inheritors of the stories and images of their traumatic experiences (Shirinian, 35).”

This mediation, at individual and collective cultural levels, transfers the continuing impact of the 1915 trauma into the everyday lives and self-understandings of the later generations and helps shape their identities. In other words, even though the traumatic events of 1915 happened more than a century ago, their psychological and cultural effects continue into the present. Marc Nichanian captures the import of postmemory in simple and yet stark language: “The genocide is an obsession that haunts Armenians in the diaspora” (Nichanian, 127).<sup>55</sup>

As “a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (M. Hirsch 2008, 105), postmemory continues to be essential in defining the Armenians’ belated relationship to 1915. Growing up with such overwhelming inherited memories that precede their direct consciousness is, as Hirsch suggests, “to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation” (107). In fact, primarily because of the poverty of archives associated with 1915, the traumatic experiences are transmitted to later generations through postmemory “so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (106-7). By actively reengaging with and reinventing the postmemory, post-exilic Armenian homecoming films are particularly best positioned to create new experiences for the filmmakers and audiences alike and transform their understanding of the original trauma.

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<sup>55</sup> In the context of the Holocaust, LaCapra also suggests: “With respect to an event of such incredible dimensions as the Holocaust, it may be impossible for those born later ever to transcend this event fully and to put it in the past, simply as the past” (LaCapra 2001, 202)

## Postmemorial Aesthetic Work and the Need to Produce Visual Evidence

Generations of Armenians have attempted to come to terms with the Armenian Genocide and its legacy through postmemorial aesthetic work in arts, including film. In both fiction and non-fiction film, as discussed in Chapter 1, the historically dominant aesthetic approach has been preoccupied with proving that the genocide had taken place and with recalling the trauma through repetitive displays of limited iconic images depicting deportation, pain, and death. In this context, post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” documentaries are particularly significant in terms of their predisposition to break away from this tradition and overcome its pitfalls through the introduction of a new postmemorial aesthetic approach. This memory work is best conceived as experimentation through journeying in search of new ways to mediate the memory of the Armenian Genocide and trauma. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the resulting films simultaneously validate, reinterpret, expand, and re-contextualize the postmemory of the filmmakers and of the (predominantly Armenian) audiences.

A key challenge to postmemorial aesthetic work is the phenomenon of missing archives, which creates the need for the production of new visual evidence. The non-existent and insufficient visual evidence and the missing (destroyed or hidden) archives have rendered the Armenian Genocide a non-event or non-document whose non-eventness is being further underscored through its systematic ongoing denial (Baronian, Nichanian). This has long presented a significant challenge for the dominant aesthetic approach to the Armenian Genocide as a historical fact, which is best captured in what Marc Nichanian calls the “historiographic perversion”, i.e., how to visually speak about the Armenian Genocide without having to prove that it actually took place” (Nichanian,

107). Consequently, Nichanian recommends an aesthetic approach to the Armenian Genocide not as a fact, but as an event, based on his crucial distinction between “Genocide” and “Catastrophe”: “Genocide” as an historical fact, one that constantly requires historical and empirical proof versus “Catastrophe” as an event that constantly avoids meaning and that calls for ongoing acts of aesthetic and literary postmemorial memory work. Building on Nichanian’s analysis, Baronian argues that “Armenians are thus caught in an inextricable archival paradox: they have to produce (visual) evidence precisely because the evidence has been destroyed and negated.” (Baronian 2010, 208)

The question remains: How to produce this visual evidence? Partly also to address Nichanian’s predicament of “historiographic perversion”, Baronian proposes that “fiction is an appropriate response to a genocide that is still considered to be a fictional event or an event that did not leave any traces” (206). She particularly points at fiction films that are creative depictions of multigenerational traumatic postmemory of the Catastrophe and that are not motivated to prove the genocide through graphic images of the trauma or such dramatizations. She proposes the work of two Canadian-Armenian filmmakers, Egoyan’s *Ararat* and *A Portrait of Arshile* (1995), and Torossian’s *Girl from Moush* (1993) as exemplary attempts which could meet “a rather obsessive need to recall, by any means, the denied and violent history” (219). According to Baronian, filmmakers like Egoyan and Torossian recreate images as “prosthesis for memory” (206) to substantiate Armenian-ness and to provide an artistic and ethical response to “the lack of images that mimetically and graphically depicts the Armenian tragic past” (217).

These visual representations of the inherited genocide are accomplished memory works according to Baronian mainly because “the heritage of the Catastrophe can *only* be

imagined” (217). For Baronian, the homeland is also “imagined”, and can be visited “only through the process of a visual and virtual journey” (216) as in the case of Egoyan and Torossian, and of course by the great majority of Armenian filmmakers, who have chosen not to make their films on genocide in Turkey. Torossian best summarizes this avoidance: “After making the film I realized this is just a dream, a fantasy about *a country I could never visit. No one could.* You make it because you’re blind to something. Afterwards you see what’s there. I needed to make the film to grow up, to become wiser” (emphasis is mine) (216).

On the contrary, Avedikian, Zeitindjioglou, Bezjian, and other post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” filmmakers undertake *real* journeys to Turkey (instead of imaginary or virtual ones) for an alternative postmemorial aesthetic work. Given the non-existent or insufficient visual evidence of the Armenian Genocide, if “genocide is the destruction of the archive” (Nichanian 2008) as Nichanian suggests, “homecoming” films become de facto pioneering sources of novel images and memories towards the replenishment of this sparse archive.

These films, including the three films analysed in this study, help fill a critical visual gap through personal testimonies and newly depicted interpretations of transmitted memories of the trauma of the genocide. They produce firsthand experiences of being in the ancestral homeland and fresh evidence of pre-1915 and modern day Armenian lives. They also create original images of the homeland, and personal impressions and interpretations as new-found “prosthesis for memory”. As such, while these films to a great extent validate the trauma of the postmemory, they also nourish a new memory of resistance for combating narratives of denial thanks to layers of fresh observations,

interactions, dialogues and images from the ancestral homeland with patent indexical qualities.

In fact, as soon as they arrive in Turkey as the grandchildren of survivors, either before or behind the camera, throughout their journey, the filmmakers manifestly become living proof of life before 1915 due to their direct familial ties to ancestral hometowns (Avédikian), inherited last names (Zeitindjioglou), and intimate knowledge of cultural heritage belonging to geographies they have never visited (Bezjian). As a result, the filmmakers themselves emerge as visual “evidence” of a supposed “non-event”, as their life stories and mere presence in their ancestral homeland suffice to point directly at an endangered pre-1915 Armenian heritage and indirectly at the genocide and mass deportations, often also disturbing the denialist narratives.

One of the best examples of how the post-exilic Armenian journey films fill critical visual gaps through fresh images is when the town’s kind Turkish doctor in *We Drank the Same Water* points at the ruins of an old Armenian church after hearing that Avedikian is an Armenian originally from Sölöz. As Avedikian starts climbing up some stairs that have been recently built as an addition to the ruins of the church, he realizes that the stairs are made of the tombstones of pre-1915 Armenian graves. As the camera pans down the Armenian inscription on the tombstone, the subtitles capture a mother’s last words to her son, died at the young age of twenty-one:

*Zadig H. Terziyan - 29.11.1886 - 21.04.1907*  
*Sleep sweetly, my son*  
*Buried under the earth of your grave*  
*Be like a fire*  
*Let your pure soul water the flowers on your tomb*  
*You sleep sweetly*  
*Oh, that I might have another life with you*  
*Your mother*

As the grief-stricken poetic inscriptions are translated by the VON of Avédikian, conceivably read for the very first time for nearly a century, the images of the tombstones—turned-staircases radically transform the meaning of the place. Through Avédikian’s camera, we simultaneously witness pre-1915 Armenian life and heritage in Sölöz, its ongoing eradication, and the revalidation of traumatic postmemory. The segment somberly unearths the deeply-rooted history of a time and its heritage, which is now nearly erased.

The tombstone stands as a new-found archival document of Armenian existence and as a symbol of a culture, life and death infusing these lands with many stories, pains and emotions. Even though the Armenians are gone, the signs of a deeply-rooted spiritual life are left behind, which emerges as a testimony to Armenian presence and connection to the land that is systematically denied by official state history. The practically blasphemous misuse of sacred tombstone emerges as a new document of the Catastrophe without needing any graphic representation of the 1915 events. As the image of the tombstones ties Avédikian irrevocably to Sölöz, Avédikian’s voice over articulates the familial connection: “I just left foot on my ancestors’ tombstones. Grandfather Avedis often recalled the poems engraved upon them.”

Before discussing how these films, and their underlying journeys, function as novel and daring acts of “working-through” the trauma of the Armenian Genocide, I will discuss the concept of “working-through” (introduced above) in the context of the Armenian Genocide and film.

## Working-Through the Trauma of 1915

Working-through refers to a process through which the survivors or people who carry the scars of a traumatic event, work actively on the posttraumatic symptoms that haunt them in order to mitigate their effects. As such, working-through offers an alternative to compulsive repetition or acting-out of the trauma, “thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present and future” (LaCapra 2004, 119). This form of postmemory work mainly involves circumventing the repetitive processes of acting-out the trauma (144). In this respect, working-through is a continuing process that “requires going back to the problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them” (148). Throughout this process, it is important for the person to gain a critical distance on the problems and especially to develop a future-oriented and life-affirming perspective, distinguishing between past, present and future. The key mode of working-through is mourning as opposed to melancholy. As a meditative, argumentative, and self-questioning process, mourning creates a countervailing force to acting-out and melancholia. However, the working-through process, without a natural or pre-defined outcome, does not necessarily lead to a cure or total liberation from the past or its melancholic burdens. In other words, certain wounds may not completely heal.

In the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films, mourning and working-through the trauma are the *raison d’être* of the films even though the acting-out and the compulsive repetition of the trauma of 1915 remains the inevitable underlying reality omnipresent in the form of archival images, survivor and expert testimonies, and the filmmakers’ expected fixation on loss, genocide and its denial. However, even though

they cannot completely evade it, the filmmakers are for the most part able to break away from the desire to “provoke repetition of trauma” and the “desire to relive that suffering” (LaCapra 1997, 236).<sup>56</sup> They make only occasional and selective use of images of pain, suffering, and trauma. Instead, as a countervailing force to acting-out, they frequently bring into play fresh images of Armenian heritage and its deep pre-1915 roots, and patchy and yet often emotionally powerful and moving visual images, and verbal and gestural statements of recognition of the genocide by the locals.

This cinematic working-through process is sustained throughout these films by the directors’ engagement with the locals, distinct camera work, and the reflexive mode. The filmmakers lead the working-through process mainly through active engagement with their surroundings and conversations with the locals about 1915, denial, and recognition. They take risks and break new ground by questioning and sharing their views of 1915 with the descendants of the perpetrators. This approach produces highly emotional, authentic, visual and personal testimonies that validate, but especially challenge and bring new nuances to the traumatic postmemory of the filmmakers, and the Armenian audiences alike. The filmmakers’ distinct camera work is guided by the new sensitivities grounded in their traumatic postmemory, which they bring to the homeland. The resulting images capture previously ignored traces of pre-1915 life and the genocide and transform remnants of long forgotten or written-off Armenian heritage into sites of interest for the filmmakers and their audiences alike either accentuating the cultural vitality of the Armenian heritage or unearthing what has been destroyed or forgotten.

Additionally, the working-through process finds a first-person articulation in the

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<sup>56</sup> LaCapra is critical of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (LaCapra, 1997) for precisely giving in to this desire to relieve the trauma and suffering and his quest being “the incarnation, actual reliving, or compulsive acting out of the past – particularly its traumatic suffering- in the present” (234).

filmmakers' reflexive mode and meditations expressed both through their voice over narrations and also through the subsequent interviews they give about how they decided to embark on their journeys, their experience of journeying and filming, and what it all meant for them.

Equally important for the working-through process however in post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films is the filmmaker's difficult decision to embark onto the journey and their unwavering interest in the search for new accounts, perspectives, and meanings.

### *Overcoming Fear and Choosing to Return to the Place of Trauma*

The filmmaker's commitment to going back to the starting point of the trauma in order to forge a transformed understanding of the past is critical for the working-through process. Each filmmaker however has a different source of motivation that sustains his determination, including the desire to visit one's ancestral village, to track the origins of one's last-name, or to trace pre-1915 Armenian heritage through the life stories of departed Armenian poets. The filmmaker's decision to undertake such a homecoming journey to produce a film is a difficult one, wrought with various risks. One hundred years after the genocide, the ancestral homeland remains unknown to the great majority of post-exilic Armenians. As they carry the deep scars and traumas of the genocide, understandably, most of the post-exilic Armenians find it highly problematic especially psychologically to even consider the idea of traveling to Turkey. Most "often chose not return to their homeland because the memories that they received from their ancestors are so painful" (Mouradian 2015, 15). Consequently, various continuing forms of denial, including events such as Hrant Dink's assassination, anti-Armenian rhetoric in Turkey

and the ongoing threats to Armenian rights and cultural heritage<sup>57</sup> further make the return journey emotionally onerous.

In the shared Armenian postmemory, Turkey is not only situated as the ancestral homeland, but also as the land of the perpetrators and source of atrocities. The filmmaker therefore needs to deal with other problematic aspects of his decision to return such as concerns that her journey may help Turkey by unwittingly contributing to the Turkish tourism industry or exposing remaining Armenian heritage sites to further destruction by documenting them (Aghjayan 2013). Perhaps above all, the filmmakers are primarily apprehensive about how to avoid hostile encounters with or harassment by the Turkish state officials, bureaucracy, or the public generally dead set against raising the specter of the genocide.

Despite these multilayered risks, challenges, and sources of anxiety, Avedikian, Zeitindjioglou, and Bezjian (and Sako Arian) all make the difficult decision to go on and follow through with their journeys, albeit with some trepidation as evident in the following exchange between Arian and his friend at the start of his journey in *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*:

Friend: *You've to go Sako, impossible not to go. You, being a diaspora Armenian how could you not go?*

Arian: *I as an Armenian, part of me is saying don't go, clenching my hand; another part of me wants to go, to see, to live, to write...*

Friend: *Surely, surely you must go, it's your city you as an Eastern Armenian writer, diaspora Armenian.*

The filmmakers are challenged not only by the decision to embark on the journey, but also by the fragility of their continuing engagement with local people in a historically and politically charged milieu. For example, at the start of his first trip to Sölöz,

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<sup>57</sup> Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015 United States Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>

Avédikian's initial apprehension about the nature of the greeting he is about to receive is quite evident: "On seeing the first houses we (*Avédikian referring to himself, the French photographer and the two guides accompanying him*) are all worried. None of us know how we will be welcomed." He then asks his guides to tell the villagers that "He is an Armenian and his grandfather was born here". After speaking with a few locals, including the town's healer whose openness calms him down, Avédikian spontaneously declares to the camera, reassuring himself and the audience: "I think we should be frank. These people are not terrifying." While his anxiety is understandably based on his preconceived expectations grounded in his traumatic postmemory, Avédikian is pleasantly surprised by the absence of antagonism or hostility. However, he soon finds out that the very same people who are not terrifying are not shy about denying the genocide as the root cause of his grandfather's exile. Avédikian's difficult encounter with the town's mayor, who attempts to confiscate his camera while Avédikian is filming the staircase made of tombstones, best demonstrates that his fear of hostility are well justified after all.

This type of oscillation between hospitable and friendly community members, some even acknowledging the genocide, and the frequent resurfacing of the denial is a common thread in all post-exilic Armenian "homecoming" films.

### **The Interplay of Denial and Recognition**

The back and forth dynamic between acceptance and denial is what propels, molds and sustains the films' working-through narrative. While the denial reconfirms preconceptions, fears and trauma associated with the past and postmemory, and helps sustain melancholia, the acceptance on the other hand cultivates empathy and builds

relationships, making mourning and therefore working-through the trauma possible. The denial is most often expressed by the locals through variations of state-sanctioned denialist narratives ranging from 1915 deaths and deportations being war time necessities to claiming that it was actually Armenians who had massacred the Turks. The acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide also is displayed in different shades ranging from locals accepting the reality of the Armenian heritage to recognizing the genocide and expressing empathy for the past sufferings and losses. The same interplay of the memory work is also reflected in the way the films draw attention concurrently through vigilant camera work to a vanishing Armenian heritage as a sign of ongoing denial and destruction and to the continuing existence of the Armenian culture in Turkey as a sign of resilience.

In the remainder of this section, I illustrate the interplay of denial and recognition towards working-through the trauma of the 1915 in the context of the three documentaries discussed in this study.

### *We Drank the Same Water*

After establishing the context for the Armenian Genocide through personal, familial and historical images, and having confirmed at the outset that the town's people are not so terrifying after all, the first signs of the Armenian heritage Avédikian detects are the Armenian tombstones converted into a staircase. Avédikian's emotionally overwhelming discovery of this indisputable trace of pre-1915 life in Sölöz is captured with a shot that slowly takes the viewer up the stairs one stone at a time with a solemn duduk<sup>58</sup> melody in the background. The emotionally engrossing scene abruptly gives way

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<sup>58</sup> The duduk (*doo-dook*) is a traditional Armenian double-reed woodwind flute.

to a segment of black and white still images by Joseph Marando, the accompanying French photographer.

Through Avédikian's VON depicting the mayor's interference, a picture perfect summary of official Turkish denial, we are told how "just as we were about to sit down and get over our emotions, the man with a moustache and stern face" intervenes and tells the crew to stop filming, wanting to also confiscate the previously shot footage.

Avédikian's VON captures the heat of the moment: It is shameful, the mayor barks. You know those tombstones should not be there where they are. I won't let you keep these shots." Following a brief and yet tense period of time, determined that "there is no question of letting my pictures becoming a source of blackmailing", Avedikian proposes to record over the previous shots (which he never does). The mayor agrees happily, an approach that is reminiscent of the official stance that shameful acts that may have taken place in the past are not problematic in themselves as long as they are covered up.

Even though the mayor's intervention confirms Avédikian's fears<sup>59</sup>, as he leaves the town, the director finds reassuring the cooperation of his two Turkish guides who, proud of their contribution to the unearthing the tombstones, express their embarrassment for the mayor's attitude. However, they cannot bring Avédikian back to Sölöz as the "Turkish military forbids such a collaboration." This conversation marks the end of Avédikian's brief and yet heartening first journey.

In the following two trips to Sölöz, entitled *Trying to Begin a Dialogue* and *Remembering Together* respectively, Avédikian builds a cautious yet sociable rapport with the mayor, developing a relationship characteristic of the interplay between denial

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<sup>59</sup> "I had to figure out if it was possible to have a dialogue; if the people would not chase me away, or denounce me – I mean, call the police for the filming permission (Biçer 2008).

and recognition. This is best embodied in their last encounter on Avédikian's third journey at the main coffee house of Sölöz where the men of the town customarily gather. Here, Avédikian shows the visibly aged mayor the footage of his earlier visits and his own family photos that go back to pre-1915 life in Sölöz. After listening to Avédikian's grandfather's deportation story, the mayor recognizes their shared history that actually inspires the title of the documentary:

*“We drank the same water, we breathed the same air, we have eaten the same olives, and we have eaten the same things.”*

As Avedikian sees in this rather considerate reception a glimpse of an opening for a more sincere dialogue, he asks the mayor about the 1915 genocide, deportations, and deaths through the help of his translator. The mayor's demeanor suddenly changes. He regains his stern look from 16 years ago and appears distraught. He categorically rejects Avédikian's reference to the genocide and repeats the very same official lines about the 1915 deaths being war time casualties and refers to Avédikian's statistics as exaggerated and most likely manufactured by Western historians with a secret agenda to divide Turkey. This interplay keeps the film grounded in melancholy – keeping Avédikian's question alive – “Will the Turks ever accept the genocide?”<sup>60</sup>

Another key figure with whom Avédikian develops a complex relationship is the town's traditional healer, Şevket Başol, who is extremely helpful for the making of the documentary. Başol is the one who initially guides Avédikian to the remains of the Armenian Church and supports his efforts throughout his three journeys. The effects of

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<sup>60</sup> As Cohen indicates, Turkey's denial of the Armenian Genocide is “the most consistent, strident and elaborate state-organized attempt to conceal a record of past atrocities” (Cohen 2001, 134). Given this continuing systematic state denial of the Armenian Genocide, as also outlined in Chapter one, it is not clear when Turkey will accept the genocide. However, Avédikian's question will continue to be one the preoccupations of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films.

this well-established relationship are noticeable during Avédikian's second trip when they reestablish their friendship at their first emotional reunion in Başol's office. There, Başol announces that more Armenian tombstones were found since Avedikian left, and stacked in the school yard so that they can be placed in a museum one day: "There was God's name on those stones. People couldn't step on them and I am the one who made them to put there," says Başol to Avédikian, extending an invaluable acknowledgment of the Armenian heritage and shared values.

Başol's acceptance of and respect for Sölöz' Armenian heritage remains consistent, as three years later, on his third trip, Avédikian notices a newly framed article on the wall at Başol's coffeehouse which "tells the history of the town from the byzantine empire, the arrival of the Armenians and their departure, ending with the arrival of its current inhabitants, Pomaks from the region of Drama, Greece." As the camera pans down this newly found sign of acknowledgement of the town's Armenian history, Avedikian listens, surprised to hear the message from his translator. Meanwhile, we are able to read the text, in Turkish only, that the village was originally laid out in the shape of a cross; and that "following the war of Independence, when the Armenians abandoned (*sic*) the village" migrants from Pomak and Vodina, Greece, were settled in Sölöz. The article also confirms that at the time "there were 2,956 people living in 731 households, all of whom Armenian." Such a public acknowledgement of the Armenian-ness of the town, in writing as captured by the camera, heralds the enabling role engagement could play towards working-through.

Despite this long lasting strong friendship reflected through their intimate body language, shared laughter and jokes and Başol's sincere interest in the Armenian heritage

of Sölöz, Başol still prefers to refer to the “departure” of the Armenians rather than their deportation or forced migration; he also remains silent about the reasons behind the nonexistence of Armenians in present-day Sölöz. Moreover, he carefully avoids discussions about the word “genocide”, its trauma or its effects on the Armenians, and claims that “there were no such killings in these parts (*of the country*).” Taken as a whole, Başol’s seemingly genuine interest in the village’s history intersects with Avédikian’s agenda and familial ties with the town, which serves as a main source of encouragement for the director. However, the deeper dialogue Avédikian is seeking never materializes.<sup>61</sup>

The interplay of denial and recognition also marks Avédikian's interactions with Levent, the local historian who is another key figure in the film. Like Başol, Levent is also interested in helping Avédikian with the discovery of the town’s Armenian heritage. However, compared to other residents of Sölöz who do not question the reasons behind the “departure” of the Armenians, Levent admits to Avédikian that the Armenians were forced by bandits to leave. As Levent points at the surrounding hills of Sölöz and explains that the Armenian villagers had to camp there for weeks before their flight in all directions, the peaceful green hills captured by the camera are promptly reinvested with a new somber meaning for the viewers. In so doing, Levent is the first villager acknowledging the pain and trauma of the 1915, moving the recognition bar even higher, including acknowledging that “the worst thing in life is to be separated from your country and your soil, which is emotionally unbearable – whomever this people maybe.” However, as Avedikian questions directly Levent’s understanding of the past in the safety of his house, Levent takes his time reflecting on his thoughts and, with a calm voice,

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<sup>61</sup> Başol’s silence on the topic of genocide may possibly be due to fear of prosecution, which may also apply to the mayor.

slides slowly into a variant of the denialist track -- explaining the forced deportations as somewhat justifiable wartime casualties caused by states who create animosities among peoples who normally live in peace as neighbors. According to Levent, “war is always cruel”, but what happened in 1915 was not genocide - it was wartime and, during war, it is normal to have casualties from both sides.<sup>62</sup>

This interplay of distinct shades of recognition and denial concludes with a highly emotional encounter and a joint act of mourning by both Avedikian and Levent. Before Avédikian’s departure from Sölöz at the end of his last visit, Levent gives him an antique door knocker as a farewell gift. Preceding this scene the director inserts short segments of close shots of possibly Armenian heritage houses and doors. With an emotional and trembling voice, apologetic and yet proud, Levent extends his hands forward holding the door knocker and says: “It might come from your grandparent’s door. It’s a pleasure to give this to you.” Touched by this small gesture of recognition, Avédikian accepts the gift with humility and watery eyes. While the door knocker seals the bond between Levent and Avédikian and appears as a symbol of reconciliation, the insertion of the segment validates the film’s drive towards working-through the trauma of 1915.

As Avedikian confirms in a 2008 interview on his documentary, what he is seeking is not so much the recognition of the term “genocide”, but an authentic engagement and dialogue with the locals, the understanding of the trauma experienced by

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<sup>62</sup> Avédikian’s exchanges with Levent are further supplemented by Avédikian’s use of VON and archival photos. The resulting effect is to further contextualize and historicize Levent’s accounts where they are aligned with known historical facts, e.g., “11,950 Armenians lived in Bursa (*largest city near Sölöz*) until 1915.” However, where there is a discrepancy, e.g., whether the 1915 events amounted to genocide or not, Avédikian resolves it by carefully aligning the images of marching Ottoman soldiers with an unequivocal and commanding narrative: “Using WWI as an excuse, the Young Turk government headed by Enver, Talat and Cemal Pashas carried out the systematic genocide of its own Armenian citizens. Nearly 1.5 million Armenians were exterminated; murdered, starved, tortured, were lead to their deaths by forced marches. The rest of the Armenian population fled into permanent exile.”

the Armenians at the time: “The problem was not the terminology at the time or the survivors who had lost all of their belonging, lands, trying to survive; but the incomprehension, shock, the deep trauma of having lost everything; but especially being betrayed by the people with whom they were living for so long” (Biçer 2008). With Levent, he comes closer to his objective.

Another way Avedikian helps develop an improved understanding of the Armenian trauma is by engaging the town in a multilayered historical inquiry. On his second and third trips, he shares with the town’s people the photos and videos he had taken on his previous trips, which trigger the town’s people’s interest in their previous conversations with him. This joint reflective focus on collective memory allows the director to introduce his own inquiry while the town’s residents take pleasure in looking at their own recent images with great curiosity and interest. He asks for example questions about Hagop Oshagan, a famous exiled writer from Sölöz who wrote extensively on the town’s history, daily life and the trauma of 1915. In these segments the town’s people’s great excitement about images from their own near history is juxtaposed with Avédikian’s desire to know more about the Armenian heritage in Sölöz. This shared multilayered interest and excitement in collective memory contextualizes the present within a continuum of past, present and future, which significantly deepens the engagement with the locals and helps sustain the working-through process.

Avédikian leaves Sölöz, the town he had first visited 16 years ago with great apprehension and fear, with a renewed trust in the possibility of his own and local residents’ (Turks’) ability to engage in dialogue. The open chronotopes that his journeys create through engagement and dialogue enable Avédikian’s working-through of his own

trauma, and also improve Sölöz residents' understanding of the significance of their shared heritage. Despite challenges, Avédikian remains committed to dialogue by spending time with the locals at the town's coffee house, visiting them in their homes, drinking *raki* and socializing with them, and even playing soccer with the town's youth, which also helps create open chronotopes. In an interview he summarizes the effects of his journey in his life: "These trips allowed me to abandon the usual demonization and recognize that there are people who are aware of the problem, even though sometimes I had to combat denial and ignorance" (Biçer 2008).

Before the closing segment of the film, while the camera pans over the town square as the night falls, Avédikian's VON declares his doubt whether Turkey would ever be able to rid itself of its nationalism and break down the taboos linked to its history. Even though the answer to this question remains unknown, Avédikian points to the potential source for the only possible solution, that is, to future generations. The last segment opens in daylight as Avédikian walks to the school yard surrounded by children of Sölöz as they gather around the Armenian tombstones now piled up as part of a museum project that was triggered by his stressful encounter with the town's mayor 16 years ago. The film ends with this hopeful and future-oriented segment. As Avédikian wants to know if the children know whether these tombstones belong to the Armenians, one of them quietly acknowledges that his grandfather had told him that Armenians lived in Sölöz. Presumably better informed about the Armenian heritage and history of their town, children's smiles project perhaps an uncertain optimism as the film affirms a fresh perspective on the trauma of 1915 by distinguishing between past, present and future.

### *The Son of the Olive Merchant*

Zeitindjioglou is an unmistakably Turkish last name worn by a Frenchman of Armenian origin, which immediately calls for an explanation that is inevitably intertwined with the trauma of 1915. His last name is also reflective of Zeitindjioglou's highly knotty and antagonistic relationship with Turkey and Turks, manifestly embedded into his life and now also into his wife's. A bit disenchanted and hesitant at the start, Zeitindjioglou shares with Avédikian similar fears and anxieties about his journey to Turkey. Nevertheless, despite Zeitindjioglou's initially cynical approach to dialogue with Turks and the fact that, unlike Avédikian, he does not readily share his grandfather's story with the people he interacts with, the film progresses through interviews with a wide range of people across a large geography about the 1915 genocide. As such, it is a successful experiment in working-through the trauma of 1915 as explicit acknowledgements of the genocide countervail the denial and the filmmaker completes the journey he had started so reluctantly feeling "the wolf inside him quieted down, soothed and pacified".

Even though Zeitindjioglou is not seen in front of the camera and his voice is heard only a few times posing questions to the locals, his personal connection to the genocide, his motivation about the journey, and his reactions are all expressed through the three colorful, rich, and fable-like animation sequences in which he is the main character as "the son of the son of olive merchant's son". In these animations, he depicts his wife Anna as the little Polish fairy and Turkish people as the "glue" people who are wolf in sheepskin.

The animation segments that tell Zeitindjioglou's family story are principally artistic expressions of the transmitted effects of the genocide on Zeitindjioglou as a post-exilic diasporic individual. As for the journey segments of the film, their main effect is to expose the ongoing denial. Zeitindjioglou, unlike Avédikian or most other postexilic Armenian filmmakers, is not keen on telling his own personal story. Most of his interviews, made by Anna, focus mainly on the historical question of the 1915 genocide. In this respect, the film's foremost visual innovation comes from its consistent and methodical depiction of the prevailing misinformation and lack of knowledge among everyday people in Turkey about one of the worst catastrophes in human history. Zeitindjioglou and Anna's persistent nudging of the locals with such an incendiary and politically loaded taboo question is, to their surprise, well received by the locals, without inciting any hostility, which further enables the working-through process.

Soon after their arrival in Turkey the couple starts engaging with the locals whose general lack of awareness about the subject matter and haste to flat out deny the genocide is both unfailing and revealing. From the start, after a few attempted interviews with young Turkish men with very limited English-speaking abilities who repeat the denialist line of defense, the first person with a somewhat comprehensible English provides the typical summary account (in the case of all post-exilic Armenian journey films) aligned with the official Turkish state rhetoric on the genocide and the logic behind its denial:

*When it was happened it was in 1915 and it was the First World War when the Turkish army was fighting in Gallipoli, in everywhere. The Armenian people were provoked by the English people... and they started to burn the (Turkish) houses... Maybe Turkish people killed many Armenian people but they (Armenians) started to burn the houses. I am not saying it was a nice thing to kill the people. No, no, no... but sometimes you have to do it to protect your family (people).*

This typical response which also conveniently positions the Turks as victims and points the finger at the Armenians as the people in the wrong is received from the start by Zeitindjioglou as a clear sign of the limited knowledge and awareness among the general public.

This version of the story (we did not massacre them; they attacked us first and we had to defend ourselves) resurfaces repeatedly through most of the interviews in the documentary, most notably in the segment about Zeitindjioglou's visit to the Archeology Museum in Erzurum. Flabbergasted by the sight of the "Armenian Genocide" exhibit about the alleged genocide committed *by* the Armenians, Zeitindjioglou and Anna interview the museum director who promises to send Zeitindjioglou a DVD on the subject matter prepared by the Turkish Ministry of Culture, entitled "The Armenian Question: Allegations and the Historical Truth". In a subsequent segment back in Paris, as Anna reads on the DVD's cover "The Armenians deeply harmed Turkish population during WWI", the official voice of god narration of the video exposes the full range of the denial while images of historical Armenian sites are projected on Anna's laptop screen:

*By far greatest damage was brought on the Turks by the massacres perpetrated by Armenians during World War One. During that period Armenians were engaged in acts of espionage on behalf of Russians. Armenian gangs engaged in full-scale massacres against the Turkish units, raided Turkish villages, inflicted heavy damage on civilian population.*

Throughout his journey, Zeitindjioglou's nostalgic camera pans across the scenic landscape of Anatolia as if seeking traces of a once colorful and prosperous ancient culture to offset the pervasive denialist narrative which permeates the film depicting his journey. In one of these segments, as the camera strolls through a train window to film a

landscape of stunning mountains, the non-diegetic voice of Turkish historian Cengiz Aktar weighs in as a powerful countervailing force:

*In a shed in village, in the east of Turkey on the Armenian border some people do say that they were the ones who underwent the genocide. I think it is ironic, because Turks are still there and the Armenians are not.*

This voice of the historian which runs from the previous segment where Aktar responds to Anna's question in what seems to be a crowded university lecture hall in France acknowledges the historicity of the genocide and its systematic denial.

However, the same statement creates a melancholic effect by transforming the very Anatolian landscape seen through the train window which Anna finds so "breathtaking" and "fabulous" into a barren space which was once home to a vibrant Armenian community. This raises for the audience the interminable question: Where are they now? What happened to them? The film does not answer these questions directly, but through its subdued documentation of the paucity of the Armenian presence, it documents the eradication of Armenian heritage since 1915.

While the film repeatedly reconfirms, mainly through conversations with the locals in the streets, the lack of public awareness about 1915 and the denial of the genocide, different forms of acknowledgement help create conciliatory and affirmative images of joint mourning towards working-through the trauma of 1915. At the start of their journey, as they visit a travel agency in Paris the young Turkish woman gives a reassuring message as she critically distances herself from the dominant denialist narrative and encourages the couple to get to know the local people. "Our government is too conservative to accept the genocide", she says and explains that there is an "official" version of the history in Turkey and that "Turks tend to believe that is the only version".

She adds:

*The Turks are extremely reluctant to rethink their own history, but don't worry! People are extremely friendly. And if you feel uneasy, you can tell them that you are French and you ask questions about Armenians. They will give you their opinion. It's interesting to talk to people.*

Such affirmative interactions rematerialize as Zeitindjioglou's journey unfolds against the background of an omnipresent melancholia visible in his gloomy mood and unforthcoming presence behind the camera – in stark contrast to Avédikian's direct engagement with the locals. However, even though his interviewees relentlessly repeat the same lines of denial as if learnt by rote, sporadic but strong acknowledgements continue to inspire Zeitindjioglou and seem to be essential in sustaining his commitment to the journey, and therefore in the working-through process.

A striking and life-affirming dialogue takes place when Zeitindjioglou and Anna visit a 27 year-old young female medical doctor in Erzurum, right after their challenging encounter with the museum director in the very same city in eastern Turkey. The doctor explains how she is also a victim of a conservative society as a woman and atheist. She understands the plight of the Armenian people very well and agrees that what happened in 1915 was genocide. When Anna tells her about their experience at the Archeological Museum of Erzurum, the doctor is somewhat surprised, "And he is a museum director!", but she is also able to offer the following cultural explanation.

*Turkish government never accepts it is genocide. It is an ego fight. If the government accepts then they will feel like they are jerks because they claim that Turkish people are warriors and Turkish people are brave. Turkish people never accept that they make mistakes!*

Awestruck, as Zeitindjioglou and Anna listen to her, the doctor points at ignorance as a key root cause of the widespread denial, which, to a great extent, renders the persistence

of the denialist narrative more intelligible:

*I took history lessons in high school, I never heard about the Armenian Genocide or something like that. I have never heard... In history lessons Turkish young people only learn about Turkish heroes.*

Several other similar expressions, voices, and imagery of acknowledgement continue to recur throughout the film to offset the pervasive denialist narrative, which motivates Zeitindjioglou and Anna to further engage local people. Among such accounts is the warmhearted recognition of the Armenians as centuries-old neighbors by the woman in Van at the wedding of the Alevi Kurdish couple (described in Chapter II), who, in some measure, rejoices over their shared historical traumas and fellowship, as marginalized peoples of Anatolia.

There is also the segment where a “charming ostentatious family” who invites Zeitindjioglou and Anna to dinner to their home confirm how information about 1915 is controlled by the government. The family members explain in their broken English how the Turks have long been left in the dark about 1915 and that the only available information has been the state version of “war time crimes”. That deliberate misinformation and the resulting public ignorance are at the root of denial, is also the conclusion “the son of the son of olive merchant’s son” arrives at in the film’s third and last animation:

*Thus the son of the son of the olive merchant’s son’s journey comes to an end. Here finishes the story of he who wished to untangle the knot of his origins. Carried along by a little polish fairy he had gone to “glue” country to solve the mystery of his wolf like ears. And he had discovered a nation where wolves believed that they were sheep; nothing but mystification, nothing but distortion.*

These animation segments also function as commentary on Zeitindjioglou’s working-through process, tracking the progression of his reflections as his journey

unfolds. In the first segment, he acknowledges his melancholia due to the curse of his family name that makes him look like the wolves responsible for the slaughters and trauma of the 1915.

*Let us resume the flow of our story, the story of the son of the son of the Olive Merchant's son and his despair... his wolf like ears, the origin of what he totally ignored, felt heavier than ever. He was not a wolf, that at least he was certain, what's more, he knew the wolves slaughtered his ancestors. Often he was overcome by melancholia... obsessed by the never-ending question: What absurdities made me resemble my great grandparents' executioners?*

The second animation segment reveals the film's working-through process by pointing at Anna as the person who "knew how to quash a malediction. So she took him to the very premise of the transformation where Garabet (Zeitindjioglou's great-grandfather) such a long time ago escaped deportation." Even though unable to escape melancholia as he listens to the present inhabitants swearing that "no wolf around here ever gobbled a Christian", Zeitindjioglou concludes that Turks are misinformed or truly delusional about their ancestors' innocence; "often kind, harmless and friendly... (Turks) firmly believe that they are lamb or sheep or at least their ancestors were." In the last animation segment, "the wolf inside him quieted down, soothed and pacified" and having concluded that Turks are not even aware of the lies they are telling, Zeitindjioglou declares partial success "realizing he would learn nothing more about himself". His conclusion in this segment that "everyone is part wolf, part sheep" reflects quite a distance from where his journey started when all Turks appeared as wolves, also signaling the possibility of a future opening for dialogue despite his ongoing melancholia.

### *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul*

*I Left My Shoes in Istanbul* has an exclusive focus on the Armenian community and culture in Istanbul which is very little known by the diaspora Armenians who, like

Arian, typically read about it in Armenian literature, history and poetry. In the film, the interplay of acknowledgement and denial continually resurfaces mainly as a constant alternation between the discovery and loss of the Armenian heritage. Given the stark comparison between the vibrancy and size of what the Armenian culture used to be and what it has become today, the documentary struggles vigorously to offset the melancholia of a bygone heritage unlikely to ever be restored.

Upon his “return for the sake of his wound”, Arian feels at home in the midst of a rich Armenian heritage. With its churches, schools, community centers, newspapers, publishing houses, cultural activities and, of course, large cemeteries, this neatly tight community in Istanbul is a source of joy and excitement. However, the still quite vibrant, and yet diminished Armenian everyday life is also a source of mourning as a constant reminder of what it could have been.

Arian is further stricken by how fragile the survival of the Armenian community is, which adds an additional layer of concern and anxiety. Such a moment strikes when Arian takes pleasure in his visit to Getronogan, a world famous historical Armenian high school. While enjoying a traditional Armenian lunch in the school’s cafeteria, the school’s principal Silva Kuyumcuyan explains at length to Arian why it is difficult to run the school since there are not many people left to teach or to learn Armenian.

*The purpose of establishing the school was to prepare intellectuals and teachers to be sent to Anatolia particularly for the Armenian schools but now surely there are no Armenian schools in Anatolia because... (She stops here) Then at registration time, parents ask us: In what language do you teach mathematics, in Armenian? What's the need for Armenian?*

Similarly, Kuyumcuyan’s appreciation of a more tolerant and democratic environment is offset by a fear that this does not address the risk of assimilation the community is facing:

*But we continue to do the effort and prepare yes... Rights are now being given but it's as if there are no people to practice these rights. There is no place... No people...*

As Arian tirelessly explores Istanbul's Armenian streets and neighborhoods, a heavy feeling of loss, melancholia and despair about the lost heritage overwhelm all our senses as the camera, music and the interviewees all team up to corroborate the erosion of a once remarkable culture. For example, in one such scene we watch Arian walk alone on the streets of Ortaköy, one of the main historical Armenian neighborhoods of Istanbul. While the camera pans from Sako to everyday residents of the neighborhood busy with their daily activities, fishing, sitting on the park benches, and sipping tea at coffee houses, it is as if the audience joins Arian in search of Armenian language and faces, while Arian's VON reads Baronian's description of what Ortaköy was like 130 years ago:

*Ortaköy: First of all it is crucial to know that to enter the village there are a few difficulties. My words are intended to honorable ones and not those who are thieves. If you wish to enter it from the wharf your nose will be alerted by the stench of six fabulous public urinals and immediately be convinced that for the residents of Ortaköy having a small nose could be a big misfortune. In this village there are 520 Armenian households but there are some homes where 2 to 3 families reside in them. If things continue as is, 20 families will be living in one house and at census time they will be counting rooms instead of homes.*

Like other post-exilic Armenian documentaries, *I Left My Shoes in Istanbul* also has a few critical sequences of acknowledgement that support the working-through process. The film for example starts with such an important sequence as Nigol and Arian visit an Armenian family and run into a television crew from the Turkish National Broadcasting Agency (TRT) who is also visiting the Tovmasians for the filming of a series called "Living Memories"<sup>63</sup>. This unexpected state interest in the Armenian heritage is a pleasant surprise and hopeful sign, which is further highlighted by the

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.trt.net.tr/televizyon/detay.aspx?pid=23546>

Turkish programmer Sevinç Baloğlu whose objective is to document the “thousand year-old shared history of Armenians and Turks” in order to preserve shared memories:

*I hope that these stories pass to our children, to Armenian children, Turkish children, Kurdish, Alevi, and all the other communities that we can count as drops of water that will always multiply.*

Another very powerful segment of the film that breaks through the usual melancholic flow of the documentary is the unequivocal acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide and trauma by Önder Çakar, an award winning film producer<sup>64</sup>, writer and activist. In a room where well known Turkish actors are gathered and having a friendly late night conversation in a warmly lit Istanbul apartment, Çakar declares that “Turks want only one thing, they want to be friends with Armenians” and adds that it is the “Regime of Turkey” which is stopping this from happening. He then points at multigenerational guilt, responsibility, and the need for a better relationship respectful of human rights.

*Our collective past has very bad things against Armenians. You feel guilty whether you want it or not. We are in a very bad situation besides; it is still going on... For example, Hrant died and the trial of his killer is going very bad, as if it is staged... why is it important for Turks to have a clear look at the Armenian question? For Armenians or for all the nations in the world it is very important, because it is about human rights. Being against genocide is the duty of each of the six billion human beings... We, as grandsons of those Turks who killed a million Armenians, we are forced to establish a new state... with blood on our hands, our conscience hurt, because we killed our neighbors... In this country, while Armenians were being killed, what did we say? We, Turks, what did we say?*

My concluding chapter does not address Çakar’s question. What was said or should have been said when the Armenians were being killed is out of scope for this study. However, building on the premise that “being against genocide is the duty of each of the six billion human beings”, in my conclusion I draw attention to the role of the post-

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<sup>64</sup> Some of the most well-known films that Çakar worked on as a writer and producer include *Takva: A Man's Fear of God* (2006), *Offside* (2000), *On Board* (1998) and *Majority* (2010).

exilic Armenian “homecoming” films in creating an initial visual space for a conversation towards healing and mutual understanding.

## Conclusion

In this study I have analyzed a growing number of post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films that depict the filmmakers’ multigenerational, intricate relationships with their ancestral homeland and the current inhabitants of Turkey. In addition to a conceptual analysis drawing on relevant scholarly literature, my study has also been based on the examination of three specific documentaries as case studies.

My overall analysis has concluded that the representation of the return journeys in these films is constructed around a string of sporadic interruptions of denial and acceptance. Such interruptions frustrate or enliven the journey, including its emotional and interpersonal aspects. The filmmakers’ fear of “returning” to Turkey, put on view at the start, is repeatedly reinforced or soothed by the locals’ actions, expressions or gestures all through the documentaries. Similarly, the forward movement of the films driven by the filmmakers’ quest for remnants of Armenian heritage and history is frequently discouraged by the utterly missing Armenian presence in everyday life, tombstones made into staircases, or Armenian parents questioning the value of their children learning their mother tongue.

I have also shown that through an alternative personal cinematic approach to remembering the 1915 trauma, these films significantly break away from traditional documentaries on the Armenian Genocide. Instead of repeated images or reenactments of death and sufferings, archival images, and expert and survivor testimonies, these films represent everyday realities in the ancestral homeland through sociable and personal camera work. They mainly rely on images of familial places, heritage sites, tastes and sounds often “remembered” through postmemory, and conversations with the locals and

their unawareness about their history. This approach moves these films away from the conventional melancholic representation of the Armenian Genocide and projects a possible world where Armenians and Turks could remember and perhaps mourn together.

I have also tentatively shown that these films could be conceived as a distinct school of documentaries with common thematic and formal preoccupations, and aesthetic elements that set them apart from the previous generation of films on the Armenian Genocide and also from diasporic and exilic accented films. Given the post-exile's longing for familial roots in her estranged ancestral homeland which remains an unwelcoming space, mainly due to the continuing denial of the original trauma, this new category of films calls for a close theoretical examination of the relationship between home and post-exilic identity.

Post-exilic homecoming Armenian epistolary films are not just personal entry points into a contested history, but they are also particularly vital to our ethical obligation to remember. The films are a reminder for us all of our constantly increasing temporal distance from the events of 1915 and the spectre of the fading away of the Armenian traumatic postmemory with each generation. This eventuality points to the urgency of remembering the events and preserving the memories of 1915, and also to the key role that could be played by the "homecoming" journey documentaries as pioneering postmemorial aesthetic work fostered by fresh new images and experiences.

These films also confirm the role of cinema as an enabler of "dialogue" and possibly a means for social change. By engaging everyday people of Turkey, talking, eating, dancing with and also confronting them by exposing their vulnerabilities, the filmmakers challenge, through their camera work, the frozen image of the evil Turk stuck

in the minds of the diaspora for over hundred years. Despite continuing state denial, in those intimate and rare moments, a new language emerges. Mostly emphasizing shared history, culture and other commonalities, instead of differences and disputes, these exchanges bring the post exilic figure closer to their Turkish counterparts and also to their ancestors who once lived together side by side. The quality of this dialogue and engagement between the filmmakers and the local residents determines the success of post-exilic Armenian films in working-through the 1915 trauma for the filmmakers and possibly also for Armenian audiences. This phenomenon confirms the potential role of cinema, and particularly of personal “homecoming” journey films, as enablers in creating the necessary human and cinematic spaces for the working-through process.

This study triggers several new research questions. Firstly, the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films could be examined from within the framework of the cinematic representation of perpetrator / victim encounters, as in Joshua Oppenheimer’s *Act of Killing* (2014) and *Look of Silence* (2015). Evidently, the context is unique in the case of the Armenian Genocide because of the temporal and geographic distance between the “perpetrator” and the “victim”, and between these two actors and 1915. However, a comparative cinematic analysis in the context of Armenian Genocide may offer a different slant on the relationship between the post-exilic filmmaker as ‘victim’ and the local resident as ‘perpetrator’, immediately raising questions about the nature of the “face-off” between them, especially against the background of denial or lack of a shared recognition of the atrocities.

Another new line of inquiry could involve a comparative analysis of similar diasporic journey films. In today’s environment of hyper-mobility, diasporas are fluid

and move in multidirectional ways (diasporic Armenians to Armenia; Armenians from Armenia to Turkey; Armenians from Turkey to the diaspora). Following the establishment of the Republic of Armenia, there have been for example two noteworthy phenomena that have triggered their own diasporic documentary and fiction films: 1) Diasporic Armenians have begun to visit Armenia in increasing numbers, either moving to live there or purchasing property, (e.g., *Calendar*, by Atom Egoyan; *My Son Shall Be Armenian* by Hagop Goudsuzian); and 2) The migration of over 40,000 Armenians (from the Republic of Armenia) to Turkey in the 2000s as illegal migrant workers mainly due to the poor economic conditions in Armenia (as portrayed in *Little Black Fishes* by Azra Deniz Okyay and *Door of Hope* (2015), Al Jazeera Documentary). A comparative examination of these films would reveal how they differ from the post-exilic Armenian journey films in terms of their adaptation of key features of accented cinema such as chronotopes and their respective concepts of “home” and homecoming.

A third possible line of inquiry would be about the spectatorship of the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films, which could shed further light on the special role of the audiences’ expectations in the making of these letter-films. Such research would also help us find out how these films are received by Armenian diasporic and Turkish audiences and better understand their impact on these audiences.

In the end, we know that the international political controversy around denial and recognition will continue to deeply impact people’s lives in Turkey, Armenia and the diaspora. The cinematic representation of the Armenian Genocide will therefore remain a key challenge as it is hard to disagree with Egoyan that “No depiction of catastrophe will ever make up for a 100 years of denial” (Dink 2015). Nevertheless, for the filmmakers

and the diaspora, the post-exilic Armenian “homecoming” films present a modest and yet impactful cinematic expression towards remembering the transmitted trauma of the genocide. For the Armenians and the inhabitants of Turkey, these films may offer a glimpse of possible encounters towards collectively mourning and coming to terms with their shared past. For us all, these very personal films remind us of our responsibility to bear witness to injustice lest we get caught up in debates about what the missing archives prove or not.

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