

EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA AND SOVIET IDEOLOGY VERSUS NATIONAL DIGNITY: TWO FILMS BY HAMO BEK-NAZARYAN

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By Lucine Kasbarian, NJ USA, 1 February 2024

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in the USSR in their fields of endeavor, the national dignity of the Armenian people
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THE HOUSE ON THE VOLCANO



"Art is not what you see, but what you make others see."

– Edgar Degas, French Impressionist artist

"Life imitates art far more than art imitates Life"

– Oscar Wilde, Irish playwright

"All art is political."

– Lin-Manuel Miranda, Puerto Rican-American filmmaker

One can argue that all three quotations above apply to the two films screened at NYC's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in recent weeks. These films were "The House on the Volcano" (1928) and "Land of Nairi" (1930) directed by Hamo Bek-Nazaryan, widely considered the "founding father of Soviet Armenian cinema." Both films were silent with Russian, Armenian and English intertitles and/or subtitles and accompanying music. Both contained staged material as well as actual documentary, location footage in Baku and Armenia. And both were recently restored in 4k format led by Vigen Galstyan, Founding Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Armenia, digitally preserved by the [National Cinema of Armenia](#). These recently restored films were screened as part of MoMA's ["To Save and Project" International Festival of Film Preservation](#).



Hamo Bek-Nazaryan, b. 1891- d. 1965

Of the many films created by Bek-Nazaryan and other Armenian avant-garde film auteurs such as

Ardavasd Peleshian, MoMA selected the above two films for its screening showcase. With the aid of a translator, Director of the National Cinema Center of Armenia Shushanik Mirzakhanyan—who was invited from Armenia by MoMA—addressed guests in the MoMA theater and expressed her thanks and that of Armenia's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport for the opportunity to introduce Bek-Nazaryan to a wider audience in the U.S. Other than this brief introduction, it is lamentable that there was no explanatory framework about the films provided to MoMA viewers nor a question & answer period after the films concluded. Both films, visually and dramatically arresting as they were, deserved some historical and ideological context for present-day viewers of any ethnic or social background.



*"The House on a Volcano" was directed by Hamo Bek-Nazaryan,
written by Bek-Nazaryan and Pavel Folyan,
with cinematography by Aleksandr Galperin,
music by British composer Juliet Merchant
and starring Hrachia Nersisyan, Tigran Ayyvazyan and Tatyana Makhmuryan, among others.*

From a storytelling standpoint, *The House on a Volcano* is a historical melodrama that chronicles the lives and struggles of Armenian and Tatar oil refinery laborers and their Armenian bosses' brutal suppression of an oil worker's strike in pre-Soviet Baku (in what is present-day Azerbaijan). Just prior to the Communist Revolution, Baku was an imperial Russian territory hotly fought over by Ottoman Turks, Tatars, Jews, Germans, Brits, Americans, Russian Bolsheviks and Mensheviks as well as Armenian socialists, not to mention the Turkic, Jewish and Armenian oil magnates themselves, many of whom would later be ousted by the Soviets. The 7th-century Armenian philosopher, mathematician, geographer, astronomer and alchemist Anania Shirakatsi in his most famous work, "Geography" listed Alti-Bagavan (Baku) as one of the 12 districts of the Province Paytakaran (one of the 15 Provinces of the ancient Kingdom of Armenia). In the words of British General Lionel Dunsterville, "all understood that whomever controlled Baku controlled the Caspian Sea."



A close up of the exploitative Armenian oil magnate featured in "The House on a Volcano."

The title of the film refers to the highly flammable gas leaks that circulated under the petroleum fields where the management knowingly and precariously built nearby housing for their laborers and families. In graphic detail, these seemingly dispensable workers were shown to be toiling 12

hour shifts a day under hazardous conditions. Russian writer of yore Maxim Gorky attested to the squalor and danger of the reservoirs when he, after visiting Baku, wrote, "The oil fields remained in my memory as a perfect picture of the grave hell."

Even today, the level of environmental hazards and ruin in these oil fields are at an all-time high, with global elites irresponsibly rewarding top global polluter, rogue state, land grabber and human rights abuser Azerbaijan with hosting duties at the COP29 conference. The film plot, rife with Machiavellian machinations, creates an environment of accumulative intrigues which culminate in a crashing crescendo and chilling finale.

From a visual standpoint, "The House on a Volcano" is a stunning, gritty, mesmerizing art film one doesn't soon forget. Even today, nearly 100 years after the film was produced, the close-up images of faces, places and machines remain arresting. Creative set designs, offset in black and white, are inventively employed using shading and light to accent scene compositions. The repetitive motions of industrial gears grinding and oil derrick pumps plunging into the black earth are in equal parts rhythmical, hypnotic and terrifying. The death-defying work undertaken by the laborers is frighteningly and effectively portrayed. According to restorer Galstyan, some movie sets were deliberately lit on fire for actors to run through and be filmed in real time. Viewing "The House on a Volcano" in the Millennium, one can recognize many manners of post-modernist industrial worker and labor union imagery the world later came to associate as uniquely Soviet.

From an ideological standpoint, the film is a Soviet propagandist's dream come true. Bek-Nazaryan constructs a plot that plays out a specific vision of how racial and class divides are at the root of all evil. Alas, students of history know too well how the overthrowing of one predominant or exploitative group, class or race is often replaced by another, also quite true during the Communist Revolution. In a bid to mandate Soviet brotherhood over national unity, we see browbeaten Armenian and Tatar oil workers overcoming their ethnic differences and joining forces to overpower their malicious Armenian overlords—even when Armenian laborers are simultaneously suspected of being subversives who will serve their exploitative masters at the expense of their enslavement just to stick it to the Tatar-Azeris. Pun intended, the actors were almost uniformly striking (not just for going on strike) for their prominent ethnic physical features, frequently rough, coarse or ghoulish. The film's visual interplay between light and dark often cast shadows on the player's faces, giving them a dark tone, which served the widespread notion that there was a desire by the Soviets to pejoratively portray Armenians as the "negroes" of the soon-to-be Soviet Union.

What is telling is that during the early 20th century oil boom of Baku, there were many more Turkic and Jewish oil tycoons than Armenian ones. Even so, Bek-Nazaryan chose to make the villains in "The House on a Volcano" an Armenian oil baron and his cronies. Historically speaking, authors such as Suha Bolukbashi attest to the fact that it was, in fact, the Russian Imperial and Soviet leaderships who instigated tensions and distrust between Armenians and Azeris because they feared that nationalist movements among their ethnically non-Russian subjects would challenge Russian

Clearly it would have been beyond the scope of Bek-Nazaryan's Soviet mandate to mention that the large and lively Armenian community of Baku was made up of intelligentsia, skilled professionals and craftsmen and or that 90% of the structures built in "the Paris of the Caucasus" at that time were by Armenian architects such as [Hovhannes Khatchaznoui](#), [Freidun Aghalyan](#), [Vardan Sarkisov](#) or [Gabriel Ter-Mikayelov](#).

The Land of Nairi



"Land of Nairi" was directed and written by Hamo Bek-Nazaryan.

The cinematographer was Garush Bek-Nazaryan.

*A new musical score was created by composer Vahagn Hayrapetyan,
commissioned by the Armenian Cultural Association of British Columbia.*

The premise of "Land of Nairi" was to show the obstacles that Armenia had to face and overcome as it was altered from an independent republic to a Soviet state. Bek-Nazaryan used many of the same sorts of filmmaking techniques as he did in "The House on a Volcano". Nairi being one of the ancient names for Armenia, the main character of this film was Armenia itself. Bek-Nazaryan created a number of raw, unrefined tableaus to demonstrate the challenges of rebuilding a nation and conspicuously steered clear of depicting the many glorious panoramas that characterize the

To illustrate a morally bankrupt aspect of capitalism, Bek-Nazaryan employed ham-handed concepts to depict how American relief aid to Armenians after WWI was both inadequate and patronizing. As flocks of peasants opened parcels from abroad, they discovered second-hand top hats and tails and beaded flapper dresses which were useless to the laborers as they donned these togs and tilled their fields in bitter exhaustion. The film offered no explanation for why Americans should assist Armenia, even though the rest of the world knew of the massive relief aid that was sent to support the genocided, "starving Armenians." By the same token, Bek-Nazaryan offers many quixotic, poetic shots of men laboring in rhythmical unison—demonstrating the contractions of state formation—their well-built, topless torsos dripping with sweat in tribute to the muscle grease which erected the Leninakan (Gyumri) Canal and other industrial achievements. Bek-Nazaryan shows us the anatomy of successful communes and collectives, mysterious saboteurs of the Canal, and also throws in gratuitous shots of poor Armenian bumpkins transforming into doctors, lawyers and engineers thanks to Soviet ingenuity and instruction.



Tilling the fields in top hat and tails in "Land of Nairi"

"Land of Nairi" even goes so far as to state that the hard-won, newly independent Republic of Armenia of 1918 was a fascist enterprise that caused widespread typhus, starvation and other tragedies to befall its citizens without mentioning the elephant in the room: these besieged, famished, beaten, exhausted, diseased and genocided Armenians had just miraculously fought off complete extermination from marauding Turks and complicit Soviets, both of whom remained antagonistic and aggressive upon the declaration of Armenian independence. This had everything to do with the state of Armenian human health at that time. It was not the Soviets who saved the Armenians from complete extermination in 1918, but the Armenians themselves who, in the 11th hour—pitiful refugees, orphans and terminally ill among them—repelled Turkish hordes from devouring what was left of Armenia while the Russian army withdrew from Kars and ran for the hills. The Soviets wasted no time toppling this fragile independent Armenia, but one would never know the above from viewing "Land of Nairi." Witnessing the plot devices and characteristics assigned to the Armenian principals, it was clear to this viewer that a strategic cinematic objective was to introduce themes that discouraged Armenians from perceiving their worlds along national, patriotic, free-thinking or entrepreneurial lines.

These two films were highly reminiscent of the works of Leni Riefenstahl on behalf of Nazi Germany and Sergei Eisenstadt on behalf of the Soviet Union—both in terms of their arrestingly stark, modernist black and white visual artistry as well as their propagandistic values. It would have been impossible for Bek-Nazaryan to have been given the enormous platform from which to produce films (beginning in the 1920s) if he were to have showcased a perspective that laid plain Armenian nationalism, depicted Armenians as the intellectual innovators that they were, assigned any positive characteristic attributed to capitalism, or referenced the very real Turco/Russo colonialist designs on Armenia. What we must realize is that Soviet Armenian auteurs knew that in order to achieve prominence in the USSR in their fields of endeavor, the national dignity of the Armenian people would have to be sacrificed. That was the price to be paid.

Thus, we have two cinematic offerings that omit any reference to the very real Russo-Turco hostility towards Armenia and Armenians. Likewise for "The House on a Volcano," the history of Armenians in the Baku oil industry—and what happened there to change the existing dynamic—is left unexplained. There also is no mention of the roles Russia and Turkey played in fomenting the Armenian Genocide nor their designs to absorb Armenia in 1915, 1918 and 1920. The imagery and stories told in both films leave the unsuspecting viewer with the notion that Armenia was a savage backwater before the Soviets came along and civilized them, creating doctors, lawyers and engineers as if Armenians never before entered those professions. Quite the contrary—Armenians were the most accomplished peoples of Asia Minor and the Transcaucasus.



A screen still from "Land of Nairi."

For those who say that there is historical value in screening propaganda films and that they are a product of their times, I would agree— when they are presented as such. Many others in the DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) movement would disagree, charging that screening propaganda films would be a form of race-baiting. The double standards at play oftentimes boils down to which groups tend to be protected by the progressive establishment versus which groups the establishment feels free to offend. We witness time and again how Armenians are clearly in the latter category.

When employed by the Museum of TV & Radio (now called the Paley Center for Media), I proposed to the Head Curator, Ron Simon, that J. Michael Hagopian's widely respected Armenian genocide documentary film, "[The Armenian Case \(Trailer\) - YouTube](#)" be added to the Museum's collection of programming. (A prerequisite for inclusion in the MT&R archives was that a program have aired on US television, and "The Armenian Case" had been screened several times on PBS stations.) Simon replied that he would not entertain the idea because he considered the film in question to be political propaganda.

For the sake of argument, if "The Armenian Case" were to be erroneously considered propaganda by a world- class institution and rejected for acquisition and public viewing, is there not a double

standard being set when propaganda films like "The House on the Volcano," and "Land of Nairi" are openly showcased by another world-class institution for the viewing public?

While I may rightly extoll the visual storytelling talent of Bek-Nazaryan in this article, I also find the anti-Armenian content deeply offensive. I remain disturbed that the propagandistic nature of these films has not been adequately written about among those who document his works. I am also incensed that Western cultural institutions consider it fair game to perpetuate misrepresentations of Armenian history at any time but especially when Armenia, with the help of global powers, is in obvious peril of disappearing from the world map. It's tragic that today, a century later, the same regional and global actors seek to dismantle Armenian independent statehood, Armenian nationalism and Armenia itself. For this reason, it is in poor taste for MoMA to showcase these films and dare I say, offer audiences a Snow White apple that contains a razor to employ a "soft power" act of war on the Armenian people. Let us remember the maneuvers undertaken by the leadership of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to override curators and bend over backwards to avoid furnishing historical context or profiling the sovereignty of Armenia since ancient times when mounting the "Armenia!" exhibition of 2018, [well-articulated in this article by Prof. Claude Mutafian](#).

Throughout their long and tragic history, Armenians have possessed a deep, shared need to be acknowledged on personal and collective levels for their contributions to world civilization. Inasmuch as today's Armenians work towards national self-sufficiency, they also yearn to see their historic trials recognized and historic wrongs righted. And this deep need only festers when Armenians repeatedly go ignored, misrepresented and even willfully omitted from present-day global human rights interventions, media reportage and formal annals of history. Thus, it is understandable to observe how elated Armenians become to receive their due when their history and culture are given public platform such as the mounting of a massive exhibition by the Metropolitan Museum of New York or a film retrospective by New York's Museum of Modern Art.

But when Armenians realize that there are often political motives behind these exhibitions that are anti-nationalistic in nature, and that these anti-Armenian messages are being conveyed not just to Armenians but to the public at large, just how much are Armenians and posterity really benefiting? Placing the cultural output of our own institutions aside, shouldn't our own Armenian intellectual reservoirs—curators, educators and the like—be consulted or even hired? That would certainly be the case for other ethnic groups who demand and receive "representation." As we return to identity politics, agency and self-representation by people of color in today's progressive climate, will Armenians again be bypassed or will Armenian Lives Matter? As a long-time media and culture observer, I find the anti-Armenian trend in today's high-profile literature, news media and the arts very hard to miss. It is not by accident.

In recent years, Azerbaijan has taken many hits for its massive contribution to environmental and industrial waste, pollution and even their outlawed use of white phosphorus – a poison on all living things -- during their invasion of Armenian Artsakh. What better way to employ indirect lobbying for

Azerbaijan and Turkey than for MoMA to showcase "The House on a Volcano," which identifies Armenian oil magnates as environmental polluters and saboteurs?

As for the **"Art is not what you see, but what you make others see"** quotation, let us remember that the medium is the message and that Bek-Nazaryan like so many other visual storytellers and propagandists aimed for the messages to shape human behavior. Films are not simply art forms and storytelling venues. They are pedagogical tools.

As for the "Life imitates art far more than art imitates Life" quotation, one need only observe the anti-nationalistic policies undertaken by countless Soviet Armenian operatives and those in high office—all the way up to today. The behaviors and images seen on the silver screen did their part to erode patriotism from the map of the Armenian consciousness in some sectors and for which we today are still paying the price.

As for the "All Art is Political" quotation, why these movies and not restorations of the experimental films of Ardavast Peleshian such as ["Seasons"](#) or ["We"](#) which manage to be avant-garde artistically and simultaneously illustrative of the visceral soul of the Armenian people? And why at this particular time in history when Artsakh has been seized, when Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia clamor to overtake Armenia, and when the nation is captive to the very same Turkish, Azeri, Russian and other interlopers from over a century ago?

"The House on a Volcano" was jointly produced by Soviet Armenian and Soviet Azerbaijani film studios in the year 1928. (Azerbaijan was created a mere 10 years before, in 1918.) Recalling this level of Soviet cooperation in the day implies that such cooperation can and should occur today. Yet today's failed "peacemaking" initiatives demanded by global elites consist of near uniform support for belligerent Azerbaijan who is unwilling to accept anything less than the complete capitulation of the Armenian state.

If you saw these films at MoMA (or elsewhere) and have similar concerns, you are invited to write to Mr. Josh Siegel, Head Curator of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art, as well as his superiors c/o MoMA, 11 W. 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019.

Click on ["The House on the Volcano 1928"](#) to view the silent movie on YouTube (the intertitles are in Russian; there are no English or Armenian subtitles nor music in this version). "Land of Nairi" was not found available for online viewing at press time.

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Comments



Kasbarian - 2024-02-12 11:00:07

An article appeared today in Hyperallergic art blog (link below) about MoMA's suspected financial and corporate ties to the Israeli military and a well-organized Palestinian protest on site. As of this writing, MoMA has not addressed the above article nor a Palestinian open letter signed by more than 100 cultural workers in NYC. IF MoMA's ties to Israeli military, technology and real estate interests are confirmed, MoMA's stance on Armenia should not surprise informed Armenians who are aware of Israel's military, intelligence and lobbying support for Az/TK. EXCERPT: Starting at 3:30pm, organizers split up to distribute over 1,000 custom-printed imitation MoMA pamphlets calling out five museum trustees — Leon Black, Larry Fink, Paula Crown, Marie-Josée Kravis, and Ronald S. Lauder — and their alleged financial and corporate investments into Israeli military weaponry and surveillance technology, real estate, and foreign support groups. Shortly afterwards, hundreds of demonstrators began a sit-in in the (MoMA) atrium. ARTICLE: https://hyperallergic.com/871345/moma-shutters-as-500-protesters-infiltrate-atrium-in-support-of-palestine/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Do21224&utm_content=Do21224+CID_1cae2a46a8a36484b8d825d9fa18931&utm_source=hn&utm_term=MoMA+Shutters+as+500+Protesters+Infiltrate+Atrium+in+Support+of+Palestine



Kasbarian - 2024-02-06 14:27:29

If MoMA responds, it may warrant a follow-up article.



Audrey - 2024-02-05 15:53:50

I am curious to know if Ms. Kasbarian made her article or her thoughts known to MoMa, and if there was any response.



Gregory Aslan Chopoorian - 2024-02-04 01:31:04

Clearly the selection of these films, without background or context is intended spread pejorative images about Armenians in plain sight. The Board of Directors at the MoMA should be made fully aware of what is being presented in their name. Clearly people who hate Armenians are in their employ. I don't know of any other ethnic group in the United States that is as openly and routinely hated across various media and social and educational platforms and venues with impunity, as our community is.



Tavo - 2024-02-04 05:01:25

It appears that New York City's Museum of Modern Art chose these two Armenian, and at this point rather irrelevant, films in order to make Armenians look bad. We must keep in mind the support provided to Azerbaijan by not just the U.S. but also, much more importantly, by Israel and Jewish American organizations. One can be quite sure that MoMA and its 'leadership' (let's just put it that way) are quite aware of the Armenian - Azeri confrontation and where Israel & Jewish Americans organizations stand: With Azerbaijan and AGAINST Armenia & Armenians.