

STUDY GUIDE

GARINÉ TOROSSIAN SPOTLIGHT SERIES

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CREDITS

SUPER/IMPOSITIONS: THE FILMS OF GARINÉ TOROSSIAN

Rarely do the passing frames in the films of Gariné Torossian settle for more than a moment or two on a stable person, place, or thing. The images flit by, often dark or shadowy, with multiple layers or different fields co-existing, uneasily or otherwise, in the same moving plane. Or, they repeat in rapid succession with an alteration or two, or with the small differences that even sheer repetition brings. One's eye is kept off guard as the image trembles.

Often what starts out as motionless (a photograph, a painting) gains a mobility or a shakiness under the hands—and Torossian does a huge amount of her film work literally by hand—of the director. The image wavers, it changes colour, it zips by, even as it is being transformed into something else. Some of the most iconic images imaginable—Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or a Rembrandt self-portrait—will appear repeatedly in any number of guises, hardly left intact. Many of the images in Torossian's films look as if they've gone through a chemical bath, as if the film image is treated—in a move at once retro and avant-garde—as a photographic negative in the process of being developed.¹ To complicate and enrich the already variegated texture of these films, Torossian has a penchant for transferring images from one medium or format to another—Super 8 to 16mm, photography to film, or video to film. This is a constant suggestion that what one is looking at could always look otherwise.

Long before Freud, Thomas De Quincey, of English Opium-eating fame, likened the brain to a palimpsest, the kind of text consisting of various layers, one super-imposed upon one another, from different historical moments. Nothing, De Quincey speculated, ever gets lost in the folds of consciousness—some things just get buried more successfully than others. Some images and words are easy to retrieve, some difficult, some virtually impossible. A good many of the images in Torossian's films seem to emerge from the depths of her consciousness: indeed, they virtually impose themselves on her (and then our) consciousness, forcing themselves to the surface. And yet her consciousness is not hers alone. History makes its mark, as in the haunting images of Armenia, riddling any number of works from the quasi-autobiographical *Girl from Moush* (1993), with its remarkable scenes—and citations via Egoyan—of Armenian churches and more, to her short film of the Los Angeles band System of a Down, who are that very unlikely thing: a metal band with a political conscience.² If Torossian's films operate in the mode of memory (found footage, images from childhood, etc.), they often consist of someone else's memories, including for the filmmaker herself. Her Armenia, so lovingly embraced in *Girl From Moush*, is partly phantasmatic, partly historical, partly mythical. Armenia is not one nation among others when it comes to memory and trauma, and so it is no accident that a filmmaker operating in the Armenian

diaspora would feel compelled, whether by desire, responsibility or both, to figure—and figure out—that history in images, images which tend to stop short of explanatory or instructive narratives. In this memorial history (whether of Armenia, the life of the director or otherwise), the memories can't necessarily be resolved into versions of our own memories. And yet we have the uncanny sense that maybe we have dreamed them. Or could.

If there is a signature motif in Torossian's films, especially the earlier ones, it is the unreeling of film strips, strips whose borders are visible, frames within frames. Gorgeous and seductive as many of the images are, one rarely forgets one is watching a film. And often it is a film about film, as in *Shadowy Encounters* (2002), the homage to/silent essay on the Brothers Quay, the legendary filmmakers who in turn explore the work of, say, the Czech director Svankmajer. What occurs in this *mise-en-abyme* is not a hollow regression of self-reflection but an intensification of charged images with a newly enigmatic quality. Adorno thought that the work of art was in principle enigmatic, but surely some are a little more enigmatic than others. Even when these films feature didactic slogans ("Change Your Thinking About Art"), their enveloping visual texture complicates any easily decoded message for the viewer to take away in his or her pocket.

These films revel in the image at the same time as they trouble it, troubling it especially if we tend to think of the image as a clear index of something we know and understand. These are "moving" images: restlessly in motion and evocative emotionally in ways that are not so easy to account for. But there is little doubt that they leave their marks in the folds of our consciousness.

Ian Balfour

¹ As for one and the same thing changing colours, the prototype might be the famous "horse of a different colour" from *The Wizard of Oz*, at which Dorothy and her sidekicks marvel on entering the Emerald City. As it happens, Dorothy's ruby slippers make a fleeting appearance in *Shadowy Encounters* only, typically, they are no longer ruby.

² This conjunction shows that Torossian is equally adept at working with her "own" material or with that of others, as also witnessed by her inspired "videos" commissioned by the offbeat indie band, Sparklehorse, where Torossian's visuals perfectly match the quirky sonic web of music and words.

QUESTIONS

1. The films in this collection are marked both implicitly and explicitly by the presence of the filmmaker's hand—scratched emulsion, layering of film, hand-drawn images, and a general play with texture. How do the imperfections and irregularities that result become central to Torossian's work? How does the personal nature of the handmade contribute to the argument her films make?
2. Given her focus on montage, rather than narrative, Torossian's films rely quite heavily on their score to provide tone and pace and momentum. Locate and explain the significance of three instances where music or sound is deployed to mark moments or images of significance in Torossian's films.
3. The images that populate Torossian's films (particularly her early work) are largely found. Given the artist's focus on themes of migration, displacement and "real" versus "imagined" places, why might she rely on found footage? What argument is Torossian making about "representation" in using found images?
4. Many of the films in Torossian's catalogue are characterized by the use of collage or pastiche, particularly her earlier titles such as *Girl from Moush*, *Visions*, and *Drowning in Flames*. What purpose does this serve in her films? Consider, in particular, the ways collage might position Torossian within these films, and within a broader cultural context.
5. Ian Balfour stresses the "fleeting," "trembling" and "moving" nature of Torossian's images. She employs this technique to various ends. Locate and explain three instances of Torossian's quick manipulation of images, and elaborate on why they are significant within the context of her practice.

FILMOGRAPHY

Hypnotize/Mezmerize — *System of a Down*, 2005, video, 14:30 min.
Sandias Eustasy, 2004, 16mm, 7 min.
Garden in Khorhom, 2003, 16mm, 14 min.
Shadowy Encounters, 2002, 16mm, 15 min.
Babies on the Sun, 2001, 16mm, 4:30 min.
Death to Everyone, 2001, 16mm, 6 min.
Dust, 2000, 16mm, 6 min.
Hokees, 2000, 16mm, 22 min.
Sparklehorse, 1999, 16mm, 9 min.
My Own Obsession, 1998, 16mm, 30 min.
Platform, 1998, 16mm, 8 min.
Pomegranate Tree, 1998, 16mm, 3:30 min.
Passion Crucified, 1997, video, 18 min.
Drowning in Flames, 1994, 16mm, 25 min.
Girl from Moush, 1993, 16mm, 5 min.
Visions, 1992, 16mm, 3:45 min.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Gariné Torossian was born in Lebanon to parents of Armenian descent. Growing up in the vibrant Armenian community in Beirut, Torossian learned about Armenia largely through music and art, which her family held in high regard (Torossian counts among her kin clothing designers, jewelers, tailors, shoemakers and embroiderers). Despite Armenia being a place most of her family had not seen, its culture played a formative role in her life.

She is primarily a self-taught filmmaker and photographer, having made nineteen films to date. Her early films focused on transformations of still image to moving image, followed by an interest in dance, body movement and text. Her primary interests now lie in fiction and storytelling. Her latest work, *STONE TIME TOUCH*, is a feature-length lyrical documentary, exploring the theme of imagined and real Armenias.

Torossian's award-winning work has shown widely internationally, including retrospectives at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Berlin Arsenal, Telluride Film Festival, and Cinematheques in Armenia, Berlin, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Beirut, and Edmonton. Publications include *Inside the Pleasure Dome* by Mike Hoolboom and *The Skin of the Film* by Laura Marks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Balfour is Professor of English and Social & Political Thought at York University. He is the author of several books, including *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*. He co-edited with Atom Egoyan, *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* and with Eduardo Cadava, "And Justice for All?: The Claims of Human Rights," a special double-issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*. He also recently edited an issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on Late Derrida. Currently he is completing a book on *The Language of the Sublime* and starting one on filmic adaptation.

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