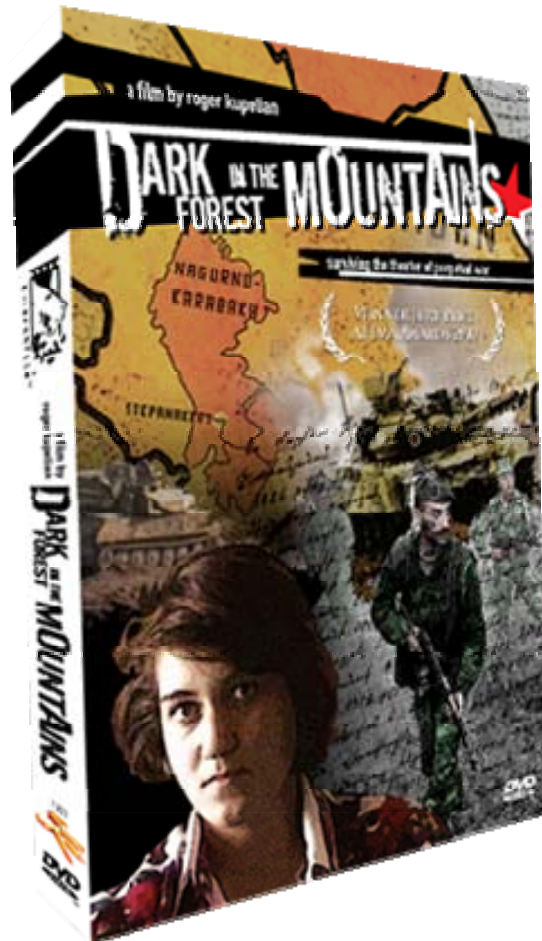


Critics' Forum

Film

Dark Forest of History: The Making of a Documentary

By Hovig Tchalian



A special edition DVD of the film, *Dark Forest in the Mountains: Surviving the Theater of Perpetual War*, has recently been released by Fugitive Studios. The DVD includes the documentary of the same name, which recounts episodes in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and was originally filmed in 1994. This re-mastered version of the original DVD (the first re-release won the AFFMA Awards Jury Prize in 2002) also includes additional footage, a journal of war photos, and a brief but arresting digitally animated history of Armenia.

By far the most significant addition to the DVD, however, is the documentary film, *Hands and a Homeland*, shot by the filmmaker, Roger Kupelian, upon his return to Armenia a decade later, in 2004. The new documentary includes interviews with people

involved with and affected by the war – soldiers, medics and surviving families with whom Kupelian came in contact as an embedded journalist on the front lines in 1994.

By their very nature, documentaries are often fragmented, episodic. And Kupelian's films are, in that respect, true to the genre. The juxtaposition of the two films, in fact, acts as an additional fragmentation of sorts, allowing the later film to serve as a gloss on the earlier one. The result is a complex composite that highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of *Dark Forest*, raising in the process a number of important issues about the two films, their subject matter, as well as the documentary form itself.

The 1994 film focuses primarily on the origins of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. It also documents the daily lives of the soldiers and families struggling through the protracted war precipitated in the early 1990's between the neighboring nations of Armenia and Azerbaijan. We see original footage of the war as well as "portraits" of soldiers and commanders, medics and heroes, families and children. Interviews with scholars and historians and a narrative voiceover provide additional explanation and commentary.

The first few episodes of the 1994 film are by far the most episodic. Together, they present the immediate background to the conflict. (The separate animated history places it in its larger historical context.) They also weave in several portraits of soldiers and commanding officers, including one of Garo Kahejian, a leader of a group of men who is reported as having been killed in battle, but only after being presented as, ironically, himself the "grandson of Genocide survivors."

This final portrait is woven in somewhat less than deftly, unfortunately, leaving the impression that, in this case at least, what matter is less the story of Garo than its historical antecedent. Without immediate recourse to the animated history of Armenia, the viewer is surprised, almost taken aback, by the sudden introduction of the Genocide question at this point in the film. The sudden shift in focus fails to do justice to the historical irony of Garo's tale, allowing it to be engulfed by the enormity of the subject instead of presenting it as one element (albeit an important one) in the film's larger trajectory.

The rest of the 1994 film and its 2004 epilogue offer a direct, and by and large more compelling, response to this initial moment of crisis. In essence, the films together try to answer the implicit question raised by the first – "How does one begin to speak of the Genocide?"

One sequence in the episode entitled "the great game," for example, follows a group of soldiers planning a campaign. Kupelian carefully describes the struggles and vicissitudes of battle that help illuminate the implications of the larger conflict. Another simple but effective sequence presents an interview with a medic, who suggests that the battle for Karabagh is meant to avoid another forced exodus of Armenians, like the ones from Van, Mush, and Erzerum, in the early twentieth century.

In perhaps the most effective sequence of all, we watch and listen to a father recount how, after several returns from battle unscathed, his son playfully accused him of having misled him about the war and gone off to spend time with friends instead. The father goes on to say that his son's curiosity about the war soon led him, along with his cousin, to put on their fathers' clothes and sneak off to the battlefield.

Perhaps better than any other sequence in *Dark Forest*, this retelling of a true story highlights in almost novelistic fashion the difficult vagaries of the conflict: a son who jokes that his soldier father is deceiving him then proceeds to assume his father's identity and take matters into his own hands by heading to the battlefield. The episode illustrates in uncanny fashion both the father's and son's depth of commitment to a cause and the occasional absurdity of the war that united them in it. What is more, the audience is allowed to take in the story unfiltered, unadorned. To his credit, Kupelian films the father seated alone in the backseat of a car, the lens focused on his face, telling his tale as he knows it.

Sequences such as these help make the second half of the 1994 film more convincing than the first. In the second half, the film raises issues more skillfully and less intrusively than in the first, less as weighty questions that hang over the film or intrude at inopportune moments than as its true subtext, haunting its narrative like the duduk music that permeates so much of its span.

The 2004 film presents a "where are they now" series of episodes in which, during individual interviews, the people introduced in the first film comment on the war, its significance, and its effect on their lives. Most important of all, the 2004 film presents two related issues that help clarify and begin to answer the questions raised by the 1994 film – the theme of "perpetual war" and its antecedent notion of a perpetual struggle for existence.

We are told by one of the soldiers, for instance, that the 1994 truce between Armenia and Karabagh is no more than an illusory victory and that the Nagorno-Karabagh region cannot be truly independent so long as nations do not recognize its right to exist. And historian Levon Marashlian suggests that without its "symbiotic" relationship with Karabagh, Armenia would not survive. He adds that the historical example of Nakhichevan serves as a solemn reminder of what can happen to Karabagh, and by implication, Armenia itself. The region, which lies immediately south of present-day Armenia, was carved out by Stalin and, as a consequence, lost its entire population of Armenians, which at one time made up 40% of the people living there. Finally, Marashlian makes the explicit link between the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and the Armenian Genocide of the early twentieth century – by killing one and a half million Armenians and thereby bringing the nation to the brink of extinction, he explains, the Ottoman Turks precipitated the desperate struggle for existence that has raged ever since. The comment effectively "closes the loop" with the one made by the medic in the 1994

film – that the struggle for Nagorno-Karabagh is the response to the forced exodus of Armenians from Van, Mush and Erzerum.

Dark Forest in the Mountains raises long-standing and difficult questions about the struggle for independence, for family and for survival and deals with them effectively and convincingly. The film occasionally suffers from awkward moments but is generally well-paced and features skillful editing, narration, sub-titling, and direction. Perhaps the next iteration (in 2014?) will blend the two films together and find an even stronger narrative thread. But until then, the present version more than lives up to its name. (A brief mention in the DVD's animated history explains the somewhat mysterious origin of the film's title – *Dark Forest in the Mountains* is a loose translation of “Nagorno-Karabagh.”) Despite occasionally losing its way, the latest version of Kupelian's film nonetheless skillfully navigates the dark forest of history and emerges intact.

Roger Kupelian is a visual effects artist whose credits include *Lord of the Rings* and the recent *Flags of Our Fathers*. He is currently working on a docudrama about the legend of Vartan Mamigonian.

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