

# Resisting the Canvas of Soviet Ideology: Analysing Dissent and Despair in Albert Mkrтчyan's 'The Song of the Old Days' (1982)

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## Abstract

*This article examines Albert Mkrтчyan's Soviet Armenian film, 'The Song of the Old Days' (1982), within the context of resistance against prevailing Soviet ideology. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the film diverges from traditional war-centric portrayals to explore the profound consequences of conflict on the inhabitants of a small Armenian town. Through deliberate scenes, it critiques the dissatisfaction with the ruling party and portrays a desperate search for meaning amid ideological despair. The film challenges the 'Big Other,' highlighting how individuals turn to alternative means such as religion and age-old rituals in times of despair. A satirical portrayal of a Communist Party event and the emotional resonance of a folk song serve as powerful instances where the film confronts and questions Soviet propaganda. By juxtaposing the film's imagery with mass-produced Soviet posters, such as comparing the 'Motherland calls!' poster to the collective mother figure in the film, named Mother Armenia, this analysis unveils a nuanced critique of the disparity between propagated ideals and reality.*

**Keywords:** Soviet-Armenian Cinema, Armenian Cinema, Soviet Posters, The Song of the Old Days, Albert Mkrтчyan

## Introduction

Since its invention cinema has been recognised not just as a new medium for art, but also as a tool for propaganda that could be used to influence the masses. In the context of the Soviet Union, film was not only an art form but also a tool of ideological expression, shaped by the shifting tides of political power. Amidst this backdrop, Soviet Armenian filmmaker Albert Mkrтчyan emerged as a distinctive voice, using his films to explore themes of national identity, historical memory, and personal tragedy. One of his most profound works, *The Song of the Old Days* (1982), serves as a compelling case study of how cinema can both conform to and subtly challenge the narratives imposed by an authoritarian regime. The film stands as a representation of the growing discontent and resistance within the Soviet film industry against the centralised aesthetic standards. It aligns with the trend of regional films that emphasised national elements, aspired to challenge the prescribed ideals of the ruling party and portrayed the human toll of World War II. Incorporating film analysis, interviews, and historical context the following chapters examine Mkrтчyan's work and its significance within the Soviet

cinematic landscape showcasing how *The Song of the Old Days* being funded during Brezhnev's rule challenged the official narratives by employing the use of juxtapositions, double meanings and rhetoric.

## Historical Background

In the Soviet Union, cinema, primarily funded by the government, played a crucial role in promoting and propagating the communist ideology of the ruling party and advancing the reconstruction of society. Cinema was closely regulated, and each period of leadership brought about changes in the artistic style of Soviet filmmakers. Under Lenin's rule, films were utilised as tools of social engagement and propaganda, while during Stalin's era, Socialist Realism emerged as a means of glorifying communist values. Sergei Tretyakov elucidated the role of films during this time in his article "Наше Кино" (Our Cinema) (1928, 33-34), stating that revolutionary art served a dual purpose. On one hand, films were meant to agitate and inspire the working class, fueling their enthusiasm for building a new society. On the other hand, cinema was employed to disseminate communist ideology and involve the audience in the revolutionary reconstruction.

However, following Stalin's demise, a notable transformation swept across the Soviet republics, with filmmakers delving into profound themes rooted in history and tradition. Without the backdrop of war and revolution, this period lacked the same enthusiasm and hope for victory. Dissatisfaction with the communist party began to rise across the country, and this discontent found expression in art as well. Soviet cinema began to move away from endorsing and supporting the system and instead, filmmakers began to seek deeper meanings and embrace uncertainty (Zabel, 1993). This period also witnessed a rise in regional films (across the Soviet republics) that delved into local history and traditions, often seen as acts of resistance against the Soviet regime's aesthetic standards. Soviet Armenian cinema mirrored this evolution. Films produced from 1952 onward often distanced themselves from communist narratives, focusing solely on local subjects. Examples include the exploration of conflicts between villagers in *We and Our Mountains* (1969) and the portrayal of a family drama in *The Tango of Our Childhood* (1984), thereby promoting local culture and heritage. It is significant also that most of the narrative films produced during this period employ the usage of local dialects rather than the official ones. Noteworthy filmmakers like Artavazd Peleshyan (sometimes referred to as Pelechian) and Sergey Parajanov embraced non-linear storytelling

to champion themes of national identity. In the case of Peleshyan, this approach involved criticism of the regime, while Parajanov highlighted cultural heritage.

It is important to note that during World War II the glorifying narratives and the depiction of victorious combat scenes were done with the purpose of propaganda and to keep the spirit of the population high but the same stance where no artistic work could diverge from the official representations continued also after the war and till the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 (Shpolberg, 2017) which “gave way to more human-scaled representations that allowed for the expression of genuine emotions, if still in carefully hedged ways” (Sanders, 2015, 38). One of the most notable Soviet films that have taken an approach of showcasing the impact of war on the city dwellers was *The Cranes are Flying* (1957) directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, made during a period that would later get named the Thaw.

Brezhnev represented a stark departure from Khrushchev’s boldness and novelty. Under Brezhnev’s leadership, a stabilisation policy took hold, marked by the abandonment of Khrushchev’s liberalising reforms and a tightening grip on cultural freedom. As he ascended to power, Brezhnev increasingly adopted an authoritarian and conservative stance. The trial of writers Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky in 1966 (later receiving sentences of seven and five years of hard labour, respectively), marking the first public trials of this kind since Stalin’s rule, signalled a return to repressive cultural policies. Over subsequent years, numerous other writers and their supporters faced arrest, imprisonment, or labour camp placements. Brezhnev displayed little tolerance for experimentation in the realms of art and literature. His preference leaned towards works that glorified the Soviet system.

### The Evolution of Soviet Armenian Cinema: Albert Mkrtychan

Albert Mkrtychan (1937-2018) is a well-known Armenian director with an extensive portfolio spanning both the Soviet era and Independent Armenia. He is the younger brother of Mher Mkrtychan (also known as Frunzik Mkrtychan), a celebrated actor not only in Soviet Armenia but throughout the Union, who was honoured with the title of People’s Artist of the USSR. Like many filmmakers of his time, Albert Mkrtychan graduated from the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). His films often draw from personal experiences and stories, often connected to his family and familial ties, as he frequently discussed in interviews.

Mkrtychan’s cinematic endeavours were not without challenges, particularly in navigating the strict controls of the Soviet censorship apparatus. For instance, the script of the film *Stone Valley* (1977), which depicts the struggle of Armenian refugees who have escaped the Armenian Genocide inspired by the struggles of his parents, orphaned during the Armenian Genocide, initially received approval from the HayFilm Studio (also known as ArmenFilm), the Armenian unit of Soviet State Cinema Organisation (GosKino). However, it encountered significant editorial changes mandated

by state authorities, resulting in the removal of crucial scenes. Despite compliance with these demands, the film encountered further obstacles in post-production, with significant portions, including archival footage depicting the Genocide, falling victim to the scissors of the regime. Even after these adjustments were made, the film was rejected after completion and faced the dull fate of being stored in the archive (Manukyan, 2022). As Albert Mkrtychan puts in an interview, “[...] to talk about the Genocide, moreover, to use documentary footage of the Genocide on the screen, to put it mildly, was unacceptable for the Moscow film authorities” (Manukyan, 2023). Only through intervention by the Writers Union of Armenia on behalf of their member, the scriptwriter of the film Mushegh Galshtoyan, did *Stone Valley* receive a public screening, it aired on TV - just once, on a random afternoon without any prior announcement. This case is a stark example of the many layers of censorship that operated in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Mkrtychan continued his pursuit of cinematic excellence and made films that brought him local and international success.

### The Song of the Old Days

The Song of the Old Days, and other films... we’ve lived through them and experienced them firsthand. There was this inner drive within me to portray it all. Everything that emerges from the depths of our experiences, from our blood, from our very essence.  
- Albert Mkrtychan

Five years after this letdown, Mkrtychan makes one of his most successful films where he acts both as a writer and the director. *The Song of the Old Days* (1982) was inspired by the director’s childhood growing up in the city of Gyumri during WWII (Isakhanyan, 2012). The film revolves around an amateur theatre group in the city that, seeing the impact of war on the psyche of the people, decides to restart the theatre, thus providing the community with narratives from Armenian classics, offering an alternative to the constant war propaganda. *The Song of the Old Days* is set in the small Armenian town of Gyumri (then Leninakan). The picture doesn’t have one central protagonist, the narrative encompasses the myriad accounts of several individuals during the Second World War. In stark contrast to many war-centric stories, the film deliberately abstains from visual depictions of combat, opting instead to examine the consequences of war on those who inhabit the city and not the frontline.

The film starts with the scapes of the city in 1939 followed by a theatre performance during which the beginning of the war is announced. Then we see one of the characters, Mushegh (Shahum Ghazaryan) in a Soviet Army uniform on a train returning to Gyumri after getting a disability at war. Concluding on a symmetrical sequence, the film ends with a theatre performance during which the end of the war is declared and is followed by scenes of celebration in the city. It is noteworthy that the celebration emanates not from triumph or victory, but rather from the profound relief that the hostilities of war have finally come to an end.



Image 1 - Stills from the film. The audience at the theatre performance at the beginning of the film.

The introductory and concluding scenes - in their portrayal of life as it was and life, as it became (Image 1 and 2), immerse the viewer into a deeper understanding of the harrowing consequences of war and its power to ruin lives. There's a stark contrast between the two symmetrical compositions - packed theatre with men and women of all ages laughing and teasing the actors as opposed to the theatre with the majority of elderly and children unable to engage with the play. In the initial segments, the film acquaints us with a number of characters as if establishing them as main characters, some of whom never appear again in the film as the war exacts its toll upon their lives. Reminiscing about his childhood in an interview with Kinoashkakar, Albert Mkrtchyan notes that during the war, they were young and couldn't fully comprehend what was happening, but they noticed that people in the city, their neighbours were disappearing (Isakhanyan, 2012). This is likely what influenced the characters in the introduction that never appear again. *The Song of the Old Days* shows people caught up in a war that seems endless, in which most men have only two alternatives to choose from, disability or death. No surprise then, that as the film progresses we see more characters who got disability because of the war and that the wide shots of the film are filled with such men.

It is also essential to mention that the film features rare scenes with Nazi captives in the city who are subjected to heavy construction work. Moreover, one of the characters of the film, Ruben (Guzh Manukyan), has a special role: a job with a specific schedule to arrive at the camp and verbally demoralise and mock the captives, showing the Soviet's prevalence. This is a unique case when that type of reality is admitted and portrayed in a film, revealing another ugly side of war that contradicts the mainstream discourse of the time of a glorious country and moral and ethical society. Importantly, the other characters of the film show their discontent with their friend's role as a puppet of the regime.



Image 2 - Stills from the film. The audience at the theatre performance at the end of the film.

The Soviet censorship of cinema was firstly monitored through the scripts, it was the script development process and the final script that would determine whether the film would get approval and financing from the Studios, operated by the government. Thus, many filmmakers in the Soviet Union would submit one version of the script for the Party's confirmation but would diverge from it during the production period as at that stage there was not much supervision happening, and they would try their luck in the final approval of the films. For example, one of the most famous Soviet directors, Andrei Tarkovsky was known for extensively changing the script during filming (Sanders, 2015). Whether or not the above-mentioned scenes of *The Song of the Old Days* were in the initial version of the script, is hard to say, but the most iconic scene of the film from which originates the title of the film, was improvised during the shoot. In fact, the approved version of the script carried a different title, "Good Kind People".

The scene is set in the theatre during an event organised by the Communist Party. The theatre is transformed with a red tablecloth, and a red poster with the slogan, "Glory to our hero soldiers." A representative of the communist party gives a speech filled with the Soviet propaganda slogans of the time, such as, "We need to work hard to support our soldiers in war", or refers to the Soviet Union as "our multinational homeland" and goes onto a long speech filled with pathos about soldiers and invites a mother of one of the hero soldiers to give a speech. It is important to note that the woman giving the communist speech, although speaks Armenian, has a heavy Russian accent with an overly theatrical performance in contrast to everyone else in the film who speak the Gyumri dialect. The local audiences couldn't help but notice the satirical context and implication. Moreover, during that speech, the director cuts to the indifferent faces of the people present at the gathering who are clearly fed up with that primitive propaganda. However, this mockery can only be understood by native speakers while the film's final approval was granted in Moscow based on the translated version. That could be the



Image 3 - Still from the film.



Image 4 - Still from the film.



Image 5 - Soviet poster

explanation behind the film going as far as getting a prize in Leningrad (now St-Petersburg) for portraying the heroism of WWII while clearly portraying everything but glorification.

Later in the scene, the character of the mother (Verjaluys Mirijanyan) with no incidental name - Armenia, is invited to talk, but when she goes to the platform she is lost and utters, "What do I say?". At this point in the film Mother Armenia has already received the death notices, often referred to as "black notice" or "black paper" about three out of four of her sons. She glances at the audience and starts to sing an Armenian folk song, a song about a dead soldier. In some later accounts about the shooting process (Vnews, Journalist.arm) of the film it is stated that in

the initial script, the character of Mother Armenia had a speech but the actress couldn't memorise it so at some point they decided that instead of the speech, she should sing. When the character sings, we again see the faces

of the audience members, this time they display emotion, and their eyes are filled with tears. It is no propaganda song of the time, no patriotic Soviet war song the likes of which the film features several times with incorporated sounds of machinery. It is a song about loss, that simply goes, "The sun has only risen, when the horse rushed in in sweat. Oh, dear horse, tell me, please, where did you leave my son?" I was unable to get to the origin of the song. However, the representation of a horse without the horsemen has been a popular depiction in Armenia dating back to the early Christian tombstones where such engraving meant that the person died on a battlefield. This contrast between the past and Soviet reality is a characteristic of many regional films of the time.

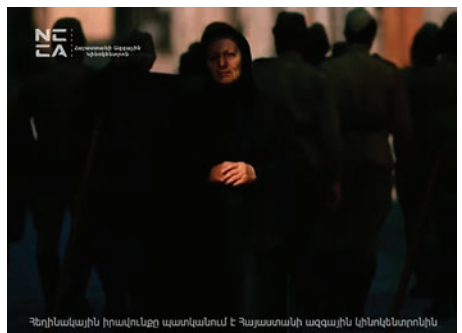


Image 6 - Still from the film. Mother Armenia

This scene essentially shows how the ideals posed by the Soviet regime fail to mean anything to the people. It portrays the woman, the carrier of the Soviet ideals and propaganda and juxtaposes her with the tired individuals who are not falling into that propaganda, individuals who are just caught in the system and trying to deal with reality, people who are touched by the melody of a folk song, which is connected to

their roots, to their national identity, to their history, to their feelings, individuals who are touched by the song portraying the actual truth of the war - the loss.

The film features numerous occasions when the poster calling people to volunteer appears in different parts of the city (Images 3 and 4). The slogan of the poster goes, "Mother homeland is calling you!" and the poster depicts the collective mother figure of the USSR, dressed in red, the colour of the Communist party (Image 5). While this particular poster was very popular during WWII, this poster in the film does not appear for the mere sake of historical accuracy. One of the main characters in the film is a woman named Armenia, a mother figure referred to as Mother Armenia (Image 6). The film juxtaposes the two mother figures showcasing the stark difference between them. The film portrays that the collective figure of the mother depicted in the poster does not match the reality and the collective figure of an Armenian Mother of the time. This is just one example of how the collective ideals of the Union do not coincide with the actuality in separate nations and how people fail to identify with those ideals.

While looking through different mass-produced posters of the time period, I came across the poster "Everything for the Frontline". The poster depicts a worker holding a bullet with the background of military equipment and factories. The film presents these factories with the smoke going up into the sky and the sound of machines giving the unanimous rhythm guiding people as they slowly and aimlessly walk to work and return at a unanimous pace (Image 7) These scenes of the factory workers repeat numerous times in the film. These images give the contrast between the main discourse of the regime as featured through the words in the above-mentioned song scene when the woman with fake enthusiasm speaks about the need to work in the factories because the soldiers need these products as opposed to lifeless images of people reduced to production machines simply doing what is imposed on them. It is important to mention that Albert Mkrtychyan's parents were also factory workers and as the director remembers, the life circumstances became even dire following the end of the war and people were

surviving as they could. Albert's father was sentenced to 10 years in a labour camp when was caught trying to steal a piece of fabric (Aurora Humanitarian Initiative).

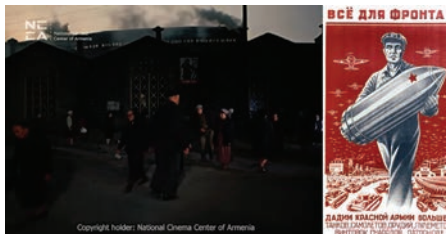


Image 7 - Still from the film vs Soviet Poster

In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012) Zizek talks about Stalinism pointing out that while atheism was considered one of the core values in the ideology, the system actually functioned within the belief of The Big Other. The leader figures were not portrayed as masters of their own will who could do whatever pleased them, on the contrary, they were portrayed as servants of the Big Other. Zizek argues that in the case of Communism, The Big Other is the "progress towards communism or history itself" or the inevitability of the historic progression towards communism. The notion of God or the Big Other plays a significant role in the film. The best representation is during the scenes when people walk towards the speakers high above their heads to listen to what the voice tells them (Image 8). It is noteworthy that most of the film is shot using either high-angle or eye-level shots. But this particular shot starts with a low-angle close-up of the speaker which then zooms out to reveal people gathering under it. I would say that this is a representation of the omnipresent Big Other hovering above people's heads, the voice of an unseen figure almost like a figure of God up in the clouds, the authority dictating the faiths of its subordinates and promising only the future of communism.



Image 8 - Stills from the film



Moreover, the film goes on to illustrate the failure of the Big Other by depicting a reality where, despite claiming countless lives, the system fails to offer hope or solace. This widespread despair drives individuals to seek meaning and comfort through alternative avenues, such as fortune-telling, superstition, or organised religion. However, when the protagonists and the masses in the film start to engage with religion, it transcends the means of prayer, they take it to the extreme, to the older rituals some of which are still practised today within the church.

One of the most touching scenes of the film features a sacrifice. Mother Armenia, having lost three of her children to war, is in desperate need to ensure the well-being of her remaining son, and so she decides to sacrifice a lamb. This ritual, while adopted by the Apostolic Church in Armenia, has its origins in the country's pagan past. The dramatic irony in this scene is overt, as the audience is aware that the son, for whom the sacrifice is being made, is already dead. This knowledge amplifies the tragedy, as does the postman's character (Mher Mkrtchyan) who can no longer handle the grim task of delivering death notice and who for two months has been carrying the "black paper" of Mother Armenia's fourth son, unable to deliver. And so the postman watches the cruelty of the act, in a moment of madness, he chews and swallows the paper.

Albert Mkrtchyan masterfully uses this scene to further underscore the desperation and helplessness that fill the lives of the characters. The sacrificial lamb, as a symbol of hope and faith, becomes a metaphor for the harsh realities and sacrifices in vain. Moreover, this scene further shows the contrasting actuality between modernism and machinery and the past and the rituals. Mother Armenia's actions are rooted in deep cultural and religious traditions, reflecting a longing for intervention from a higher power, for protection and preservation that the failing soviet system does not provide. Furthermore, the film's exploration of these ancient religious rituals highlights the failure of the Soviet system's battle against religion highlighting the widespread exploration of faith, loss, and the search for meaning in a world where the governmental structures have collapsed.

After the celebration scene marking the end of the war, *The Song of the Old Days* concludes with a touching scene showing the return of the soldiers. The director narrows the focus to two female characters, Satenik (Narine Baghdasaryan) and Mother Armenia, further emphasising the personal tragedies amid the collective experience. We see Satenik from behind as she anxiously awaits her lover's return, only to watch soldier after soldier pass her by. In her despair, she turns and sees Mother Armenia, who stands alone as the last soldiers pass. The lights shift to symbolise the forever absence of her son while she stands waiting. This final scene encapsulates the loss and enduring grief that war leaves in its path, underscoring the individual human cost amidst the larger historical narrative.

## Conclusion: A Legacy of Resistance

Albert Mkrtchyan's *The Song of the Old Days* stands to illustrate the shifting dynamics of Soviet cinema and its capacity to critique the very system that produced it. Through a portrayal of life in a small Armenian town during World War II, the film exposes the realities and human costs often glossed over by propagandistic narratives. Mkrtchyan's work embodies a broader movement within Soviet and regional cinema that sought to reclaim national identity and address historical truths suppressed by the regime. By juxtaposing the mechanical, lifeless routines imposed by the Soviet state with the rich Armenian cultural heritage, the film underscores the disconnect between the regime's ideals and the people's lived experiences. The use of local dialects and deeply personal storytelling elements further amplifies this resistance. Among others, the film challenges the ideals of internationalism, one big homeland, atheism, communist history, and mass production. It dismantles the illusions created by the doctrine and critiques the failures of ideology. At the same time, *The Song of the Old Days* also celebrates the spirit of people bound by history and cultural memory. Mkrtchyan's film, thus, becomes more than a mere historical artefact; it is a voice of dissent and a reminder of the power of cinema to reflect and influence societal change.

Although this film was made more than 40 years ago, during a Soviet rule that no longer exists, the world continues to face the rise of censorship. It is always valuable to revisit historical examples to examine how artists managed to voice their opinions even during repressive regimes and to learn from their strength and inventiveness. Albert Mkrtchyan's films continue to inspire and challenge, offering insights into the complex interplay of art, politics, and identity in a bygone era.

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