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FESTIVAL DE CANNES



DON'T  
TELL ME  
THE BOY WAS  
MAD

A FILM BY  
ROBERT GUÉDIGUIAN

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134 minutes / N&B & Color / 1.85 / HD / 5.1 / 2015

*mk2*

## **SYNOPSIS**

Paris, 1981. Aram, a young man of Armenian origin, blows up the Turkish Ambassador's car seriously injuring Gilles, who just happens to have been passing by on his bicycle.

Aram flees to Beirut to join the Armenian Liberation Army. His mother, Anouch, visits Gilles in hospital to ask for forgiveness for her son, but Gilles wants to meet his executioner face to face. With revenge in mind he heads to Marseille to confront Aram's family and finds himself welcomed into their home for a prolonged stay. In Beirut Aram clashes with his comrades until the day when he decides to meet his victim in order to make him his spokesman...

## INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT GUÉDIGUIAN

**Your film is centred around the Armenian genocide and its consequences. It explores themes that are directly related to your origins and personal history. And yet, it arrives rather late in your filmography. Why is that?**

There are two main reasons. The first is that, for the longest time, my concerns were what we used to call “internationalist.” I was a Communist, an Internationalist, and questions of identity were completely secondary. Important, but secondary. The second reason, which is tied to the first, is that the theme of identity has become extremely significant since the 1990s – and perhaps the most important, to the point of becoming the heart of much political debate in France. Consequently, while the Left was in no way concerned with this question, it suddenly became important for them to tackle it head-on. Which is what I did, starting with my own identity.

I felt obliged, in the lovely French sense of the term, “*Je suis votre obligé*” (“I am your humble servant”). In a certain way, I am the servant of every Armenian in the world, since my name is Guédiguian and, whether or not I like it, I’m the Armenian ambassador of this cause. With this film, I am honouring my responsibility.

Had I been born Palestinian or Kurdish, I would have talked about the Palestinian or Kurdish question. My background is Armenian, so I’m working on the Armenian question.

**Why are we so rarely reminded of these events – that is, when they are not outright denied?**

The fact that it is the oldest genocide partly explains this phenomenon. Let’s not forget that the word genocide did not exist at the time of the events. People would talk about mass exterminations before the notion of “crimes against humanity” appeared at the end of WWI.

The concept of genocide was created by Raphael Lemkin right after WWII. As a young lawyer doing his apprenticeship, Lemkin was present at the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, Talaat Pasha’s murderer in Berlin in 1921. Pasha was one of the men responsible for the genocide, and we talk about in the film. Along with many others of his generation, like Jaurès or Gramsci, Lemkin thought long and hard about this question.

That said, every genocide – and this one is no exception – share the same characteristics: people need to be deported, rounded up, exiled, put into concentration camps, ways of killing them have to be found...

But genocides also each have their own unique traits. For the Armenian genocide, this trait is denial. The denial of a state, i.e., Turkey, with all the weapons a state can use in terms of economics, media, diplomacy, trade, and law. This country has invested enormous

amounts of money and energy for the past one hundred years to deliberately deny this genocide everywhere in a way that is organized and financed.

**You have chosen to explore your subject through the prism of fiction. Wouldn’t a documentary have been more appropriate for your purposes?**

There have already been a number of documentaries in French, and especially in German, since many of the archives are preserved in Germany, an ally of the Ottoman Empire at the time. Some are very well-made, beautiful, and well-documented.

My decision to use fiction is tied to the fact that, although I’ve produced several documentaries, I’ve never directed any. It is not a form I’m comfortable with.

But the most important reason is that fiction allows one to universalize ideas and their impact. If this is done well, its effect is a million times stronger. Documentary is, without a doubt, more precise historically and theoretically.

This is something fiction film cannot take the liberty of doing, since it must remain concrete. But the most important quality of a fiction film is personification: one can create characters that spectators will never forget.

**How does one talk about genocide in cinema? How did you approach writing the script and what guided your choices in the narrative?**

For a long time – since *Armenia*, which I made almost ten years ago – I told myself the centenary was fast approaching and I would make a film on this historical moment. But I couldn’t figure out exactly how I was going to do it. Telling the story of the genocide itself didn’t interest me much. What I wanted was to tell one hundred years of history, meaning the genocide and the effect it had on several generations. I wanted to tell the history of the memory of this genocide – and even more than this, the history of the *memory of* this history! And all this with characters.

Then, one fine day, I met José Gurriaran. This was during a book fair. I saw him having a hard time walking across the stage. His legs were damaged, he had his canes and these massive shoes. He had come to present a book, *La Bomba*, which tells a mind-blowing story – his own! That of a young Spanish journalist in Madrid who, in 1981, jumped on a bomb planted by militants of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia: ASALA. He escaped the attack half-paralyzed. He knew absolutely nothing about the Armenian question, and to cope with his situation, he tried to understand it. He began working on the genocide and its denial. He read, he researched, he collected documents... And, at the end of this process, he was convinced that the Armenian cause was a just cause and decided to meet the men responsible for the attack. After many failed attempts – because everybody was obviously scared they were being manipulated by the Turkish Secret Services or by Interpol – he got a phone call to meet in Beirut on such-and-such a day, at such-and-such a time. He went with a photographer and spent an entire day talking

with two ASALA higher-ups, who then took him to a camp in the Beqaa Valley where he met the men who planted the bomb...

**This experience was decisive. It changed the course of his life.**

Indeed, José Gurriaran wrote two books about it: *La Bomba* then *Armenios: El genocidio olvidado*, the only book on the subject in Spain. Today, he is the principal activist for Spain's recognition of Armenian genocide – a country that officially ignores it. Every year in April, he spends so much of his time in conferences on genocide. Incidentally, the main founder of ASALA has just written the preface to the second edition of his book. It's a beautiful story! And, it isn't a case of Stockholm Syndrome. This is someone who wanted to understand before judging... His story offered the key to my film, an angle through which one could enter into 100 years of history. In a certain way, he offered me a spectator's point of view – someone who, in principle, knows nothing about the situation.

**José Gurriaran's lived experience is nevertheless only a starting point. In order to tell the story of this genocide and its consequences, your film is also about family, diaspora, uprooted culture... over the span of a century.**

Yes, because once I had that starting point, I told myself it still wasn't enough. I needed an idea that offered a more universal or tragic dimension to a simple chronicle. My idea was to have a mother who pushes her son to take up arms. This is a very Armenian mother. But, when she sees her son's attack and the injustice it inflicts upon an innocent man, she does everything she can to help him, and also to save her son – to the point where she thinks he must see the consequences of his act first-hand, and therefore meet the victim of his attack. She plots for the two of them to meet, but a tragic event occurs where the young victim is turned into a sort of new son. When I had that idea, in addition to Gurriaran's story, there was nothing left for me to do but write it up!

**It would have nevertheless been impossible to neglect certain facts about the genocide itself. Instead of having one of your fictional characters talk about them, or resorting to archival images, you chose to use a rather original prologue.**

A genocide is unfilmable. I do not see how one can film disembowelments, decapitations, people being burned, and not make a spectacle out of it. Unless, of course, one is wilfully highlighting the paradox of filming things in such a way as to make them unwatchable, which Pasolini did in *Salò*. So, to talk about genocide from an historical point of view, I made a long prologue. Speech seemed like a good way to recount the event. I chose to open the film with the absolutely emblematic Berlin trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, Talaat Pasha's murderer, who was ultimately acquitted by a jury of his peers even though he completely admitted to committing murder. Against all odds, I think the jury gave this genocide its most beautiful recognition by answering no to the judge's question: "Is Soghomon

Tehlirian guilty of assassinating Talaat Pasha?"

In the strictest sense of the term, the jury is lying. The answer is yes, of course, since Tehlirian admitted to premeditating and committing the act. He even admitted to feeling "happiness in his heart." I think the jury simply wanted to say that he was guilty but not responsible – that Talaat Pasha was responsible for his own death. And, in spite of the presiding judge's pleas, the jury did not budge.

I chose this prologue as a starting point to the genocide itself, but also because it allowed me to examine the question of revenge.

**Precisely. The attack you portray, which is pivotal in the film, is like an extension of Talaat Pasha's assassination. Because, even if ASALA's actions in Europe during the 80s did not attack the people responsible for the genocide (and for good reason), they aimed to make those who continued to deny it pay. Their objective, according to the perpetrators, was to awaken the memory of Western countries. In spite of the victims they created, did they serve the Armenian cause?**

Yes. Indisputably, yes. Regardless of what one thinks of these attacks and their legitimacy, we are forced to admit today that, without them, we would not be here. They reawakened, redynamized, reunited Armenians around the world who had probably – and this is what the young people behind the attacks thought – rested on the laurels of routine commemorations, without doing much else. This is what the son reproaches his father with in the film: we speak a little Armenian, we *eat pasturma*, and on April 24th we obviously go to church, and that's as far as it goes. Deep down, no Armenians were for these attacks, but none of them were frankly against them. It was "we don't agree with them, but..." A bit of a schizophrenic attitude.

**Both in your film *Armenia*, which already examined this country, and also in this film, one feels there is a generation gap in terms of memory. Basically, the young generation, the generation of people our age, almost seems more preoccupied with reappropriating Armenian history than the generations before it?**

This is true of Armenians, but it's also a universal rule of all immigrants. The new arrivals are only concerned with surviving. They must absolutely work, learn the language, have children and do whatever necessary for their kids to be assimilated. To the point where many first-generation immigrants often stop speaking their language or talking about where they are from... On the other hand, the second generation is free from this burden and starts asking itself questions. It wants to understand its origins. This is where the skeletons, spectres, and ghosts reappear. They – the second or third generations – are often the ones that assert this primary identity. And this is all the truer when immigration is tied to death – and, in this case, extermination.

**Even if your film is not, in the strict sense of the term, an activist film, or one with a political message, you ask a certain number of questions that go beyond just acknowledging a genocide. When the hero, Aram, tells his victim: “You are innocent, but I am not guilty,” he raises the question of the limits of taking up arms and the legitimacy of violence...**

This sentence nicely sums up what I think! I am a contemporary of ASALA and the attacks in the 1980s. I condemned them at the time, along with the organization's actions, especially when it acted blindly. Furthermore, I don't think there's a single Armenian in the world who approved of the Orly Air port Attack in 1983. But I didn't approve of the FLN attacks in Algerian cafés in the 60s either, and we talked a lot about those in classrooms at the time. I already explored this topic in *Army of Crime*. I imagined a scene where partisans risk their lives by not throwing a grenade into a brothel because there are young French prostitutes inside. They do not want to risk killing them.

It's not like I am naively angelic when it comes to armed struggle. There are situations where it's necessary. Especially when no other means of expression exists, which was the case during the Occupation. It is a little less the case with the ASALA attacks, since their victims were not directly responsible for the genocide, but their fathers and grandfathers. At the time, however, they belonged to a Fascist state that imprisoned and killed people in their own country.

**The locations are very important. They lend great truth to the film. In particular, the scenes in Beirut come to mind.**

I shot in Marseille, in Armenia, and in Beirut. I think it is important to film in authentic locations. The image isn't the same. It is truly Beirut, and the actors and extras are Lebanese. A re-enactment would have been inappropriate. I wanted places, but also languages, accents, light, and the morphology of the city – even though, in this case, the trap would have been to film the locations before the narration, simply because you want to film everything. But I controlled myself! One must be vigilant and always abide by a single principle: always make the story your priority.

What also intrigued me in Beirut was the relationship ASALA had with the Kurds and Palestinians. In the 80s, this city had become the main hub of world revolution. Anyone who had a gun on the left, or the extreme-left, lived in Beirut at the time. There were also Italians, Germans, the Japanese Red Army, the Irish, and the Basques. I also liked the idea of including that.

**At the end of the film, you do not pick a side. It is as if everything remains unresolved. We remain torn between History and this particular story...**

The dialogue between the two old men at the outset of the film, when Soghomon Tehlirian's trial is beginning in Berlin, illustrates everything I wanted to say. I made the first man utter a sentence by the Israeli writer David Grossman: “I like to think that the most important

moments in history do not happen in the battlefields or the palace, but in the kitchens, the bedrooms and the kids' rooms.” And his interlocutor answers him: “Perhaps this is why, when a war starts, it never ends. It only changes faces.”

Because it precisely remains in the memories of these people and their children...

“Alas, I think you may be right,” the first one replies. And, at that moment, a young mother listening to them looks at her baby and says, “Don't you listen to these old men. There will never be another war.” These four sentences sum up the history of humanity. At heart, we always need to think that the war we have just lived through is the last one forever, until the end of time. It's finally over. And then, when the madness of mankind returns and strikes two, three, four, ten generations later, conflict returns and everything blows up again. This is the entire history of the Middle-East today...

I therefore wanted to tell the story of those one hundred years through a few odd bedrooms, a few living rooms, and the people living in them... While allowing everyone to judge for themselves

**Do you not fear that you might be reproached with what some might call “fatalism”?**

Perhaps, but that will come from people with a simplistic vision of history. Moreover, without individual and collective actions, things would have been worse...

I showed this film to some friends, along with three ex-members of ASALA who were once chased, sentenced and imprisoned, and they found it to be fair.

I automatically think of Macbeth's famous tirade, “[life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” In the end, all this for what? When you really re-examine this history, you think, “if there had never been the denial of this genocide, if Mustafa Kemal had sent the Armenians back home, perhaps Turkey would now be a democratic and multiethnic state? Turkish leaders might have abandoned this absurd dream of a chemically pure country!

I don't see any other way of expressing this than through the common expression: c'est une histoire de fou (“it's mad”)!

Genocides have their share of insanity. One always finds objective or pseudo-objective reasons. But they remain absolute insanity with insane consequences.

**Is that where the title comes from?**

Among other things. I'm also thinking of the history of Armenians throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of all the surprising, admirable, and almost miraculous things they went on to do.

Here you have a population that disappeared from its land, that was scattered into multiple diasporas... a tiny population that could have died out. But these people have worked so hard to keep two things alive that in theory are untenable, psychoanalytically untenable: forgetting as a means of survival, wherever they were, and remaining true to themselves. Forgetting 100% and remaining 100% true to their memory. That seems humanly impossible, and yet they did it!

Armenians have remained true to their history and their culture because any self-respecting Armenian knows a few words of their language, knows Armenian music, cooks Armenian food, and goes to Armenian church, even if they are not religious, since these are places where the activities are just as cultural as they are religious.

**With this film, you are making a new contribution to the recognition of the Armenian genocide – one which remains contested or ignored as such in many countries. What could be done to further the cause?**

I think we have to continue diplomatic encirclement! By which I mean pressuring every country in the world. Many have yet to recognize it. The US, for example (with the exception of California). At the same time, we must continue the process of rapprochement with Turkish civil society. A recent survey showed that over 30% of Turks under 30 were in favour of recognizing the genocide. I think the current generation is fed up. They want democracy and truth. There's a petition in Turkey – not for recognition, because it's punishable by law, but to ask for forgiveness, which is one way of bypassing the interdiction.

I think that, little by little, thanks especially to the Internet, the truth can spread. I've met Turkish intellectuals from my generation who (and this might seem unbelievable) had never heard of the genocide before they were adults!

I also think the recognition of the Armenian genocide would do a world of good for Turkey because it's the mother of all taboos. Many of Turkey's problems, I feel, stem from this original denial.

**What would you like spectators to take away from the film?**

That they feel emotion! Etymologically, "emotion" means "to put into movement." My wish is that, through this emotion, spectators will understand this moment of history better. And my ultimate ambition is that they understand history better in general! Because this historical episode obviously hides others. Basically, it is simple: I would like the spectator to be more moved and more intelligent upon leaving the screening than before entering. This is what all filmmakers want, right?

## ROBERT GUÉDIGUIAN DIRECTOR - FILMOGRAPHY

- 2015 **DON'T TELL ME THE BOY WAS MAD** - Cannes, Official Selection
- 2014 **ARIANE'S THREAD**
- 2011 **THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO** - Cannes, Un Certain Regard
- 2009 **ARMY OF CRIME**
- 2008 **LADY JANE** - Berlin, in Competition
- 2006 **ARMENIA**
- 2005 **THE LAST MITTERRAND** - Berlin, in Competition
- 2004 **MY FATHER IS AN ENGINEER** - San Sebastian, in Competition
- 2002 **MARIE-JO AND HER TWO LOVERS** - Cannes, in Competition
- 2001 **THE TOWN IS QUIET**
- 2000 **CHARGE!**
- 1998 **WHERE THE HEART IS**  
San Sebastian, Special Prize of the Jury, Best Screenplay, OCIC Award
- 1997 **MARIUS AND JEANNETTE** - César Awards, 3 nominations
- 1995 **TILL DEATH DO US PART**
- 1993 **MONEY BUYS HAPPINESS**
- 1990 **GOD THROWS UP THE LUKEWARM**
- 1985 **KI LO SA**
- 1984 **RED MIDI**
- 1981 **LAST SUMMER**

## CAST

**HOVANNÈS** Simon ABKARIAN  
**ANOUCH** Ariane ASCARIDE  
**GILLES** Grégoire LEPRINCE-RINGUET  
**ARAM** Syrus SHAHIDI  
**ANAHIT** Razane JAMMAL  
**SOGHOMON TEHLIRIAN** Robinson STEVENIN  
**ARSINÉE** Siro FAZILIAN  
**VAHÉ** Amir EL KACEM  
**NOUNÉE** Rania MELLOULI  
**HAÏK** Hrayr KALEMKERIAN  
**VREJ** Rodney HADDAD  
**VALÉRIE** Lola NAYMARK  
**ARMÉNAK** Serge AVÉDIKIAN

## CREW

**A film by** Robert GUÉDIGUIAN  
**Written by** Robert GUÉDIGUIAN and Gilles TAURAND  
**Based on the autobiographical novel *La Bomba*, by** José Antonio GURRIARAN  
**Photography** Pierre MILON (AFC)  
**Editor** Bernard SASIA  
**Sound** Laurent LAFRAN  
**Production design** Michel VANDESTIEN  
**Line producer** Malek HAMZAOU  
**1<sup>st</sup> assistant director** Ferdinand VERHAEGHE  
**Location manager** Bruno GHARIANI  
**Costume designer** Juliette CHANAUD  
**Wardrobe** Christel BIROT  
Anne-Marie GIACALONE  
**Makeup** Mayté ALONSO-PEDRON  
**Hair stylist** Vanessa LOGGIA  
**Sound editor** Bridget O'DRISCOLL  
**Sound mixing** Armelle MAHE  
**Original score** Alexandre DESPLAT  
**Produced by** Robert GUÉDIGUIAN and Marc BORDURE  
**Lebanon production** Sabine SIDAWI

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ALVY PRODUCTIONS Executive production ORJOUANE PRODUCTION  
With the participation of CANAL +, FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS, CINÉ +  
In association with SOFITVCINÉ 2, LA BANQUE POSTALE IMAGE 7 ET 8,  
INDÉFILMS 3 With the support of LA RÉGION ILE DE FRANCE,  
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in partnership with the CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE,  
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