

# Armenian Identity in the Turkish and American Documentaries through Images

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**Abstract**— While cinema carrying the social values of past to present, it is also leading up the embodiment of the dominant perception shapes the present. In this regard, the representation of reality has much importance in the documentaries which particularly have culture, identity and belonging bonding. Documentary, as a part of its difference from fiction in line with reconstruction of reality, is a cultural product. While this product emerges, the reality is often interpreted with stereotypes, prejudices, negative political, cultural and social images. The identity representation about „we“ or „other“ is reflected with various events, connections and the past. On the other hand, the using of past of social groups, for supporting the ideas they believe in and achieving their goals, has a great role in terms of expressing their opinions in public. At this point documentaries are the areas where the producer-director reveals his/her opinions and emotions. Those personal feelings and opinions are often reflection of collective memory shaped by data of social past. The aim of this study is to analyze on which images the Armenian identity is constructed in the American and Turkish documentaries and the shaping of the representation of Armenian identity on what kind of rhetorics and visuals. Armenian identity will be examined from the perspective of imagology by the method of discourse analysis. Any intangible and tangible image that is used to represent the Armenian identity will be solved with the help of the discourse analysis. In this study, where the image, which contains a fictional structure is used to represent the Armenian identity, the references made by the director while using images to the past, history and values of the community he/she is in, are accepted as the main source of the analysis. It has showed that the perception, brought with historical events contains tension and conflict between Turks and Armenians from 18th to present, is reflected in the cultural products.

**Keywords**— cinema, documentary, collective memory, image, identity.

## I. COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The effect of cinema on the formation of collective memory is closely related to the fact that memory is an indirect activity. The relationship between cinema and individual that affect the perceiving the history and the today related with the society we are in and shaping our opinions exists indirectly. In this context, the past that has been carried through cinema products most active mass media in the social construction process and confronted with the witnesses, and victims in the past, and the past that is often censored and forbidden to think is forgotten and deferred (postponed). The effect of cinema on memory construction can be explained by two main tendencies;

reinforcing past knowledge parallel to formal history / memory and creating an alternative awareness of past knowledge[1]. *“Collective memory is closely related to the requirements of a group's identity construction, and can be described as instrumentalizing history for specific purposes. Collective memory refers to a phenomenon that bridges the past and present of society and that we can call 'the weight of the past'”*[2]. Accordingly, collective memory is the discovery of a common identity that unifies any group with the interests and motivations of a community, group or nation, and is a precondition for creating social awareness. However, it is not enough to choose any past to create awareness in society. These past sentiments should manage the emotions, urge the people to take action and perceived by people; briefly it should be a socio-cultural mode of action[3]. According to Bartlett, the past is rebuilt for both the individual and the group, according to the existing outcome, and in both cases some details and events play a decisive role by influencing the way they react [4]. The functional aspect of the collective memory becomes even more important, especially when it comes to prove the justification of groups in conflict. When the memories of the parties were examined after the events of the conflict, it seems that both groups formed different memories about the common events. The parts of these official memories are the injustices, deaths, loss of relatives, material damage, insults and humiliations and threats. These opposing memories of the parties also prevent reconciliation. When the memory is resurrected against the other memory, the parties are trying to get a wider and better place in national history. However, since one's expansion causes the other to shrink, which is the heroic one is betrayal or humiliation for the other [5].

Different forms of narration about the common past in the collective memories of the Turkish and Armenian identities constitute the main source of the memory clash between the two groups. The 1915 Deportation, which played an active role in shaping the relations of the two groups today, took place in the axis of trauma and mourning in the Armenian collective identity. Personal experiences refer to the impact of social trauma, dramatic loss of identity, social touch, and integrity, as opposed to physical or psychological trauma, which leads to emotional injuries and depressions. In this context, social trauma must be felt by each member of the group directly or indirectly [6]. Because of the persistent effects and repeated again and again in the consciousness of the group members, social trauma that is ignored and not easy

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to forget is rooted in collective memory[7]. Neil Smelser's definition of cultural trauma includes the traits of social trauma. According to this, social trauma refers primarily to a common memory that evokes past negative events and is shared at a social level. The social trauma, regarded as a threat to the existence of the group, is not erased from the collective memory [8]. In the Turkish national / official memory, the traces of 1915 can be traced as follows: *"During the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the actions of the minorities living in Ottoman territories under the claim of independence are called" rebellion " and the Armenians, who are called as the loyal nation, came to the most appropriate time and demanded independence provoked great anger in the Ottoman state and Turkish society"* [9]. In response to the diasporic collective memory that accepted 1915 as a "genocide", the Turkish official memory did not accept this accusation and assessed 1915 as a "betrayal" in which the Armenians combined with external forces during the collapse of the Ottoman state and threatened the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.

## II. DOCUMENTARY AND IMAGES

Time is an unlimited resource for the documentary film, due to the feature of it that it based on the moment whose starting point is unknown. While the experiences in time are recreated with the documentary, the main food source of the documentary are the experiences in time. In other words, the role of documentary film is to convey the aesthetic interpretation to future generations by documenting the moments that are likely to be defeated in human life from every society. The documentary according to its that role save and presents the history to society for those miss the past, want to benefit from past accumulation, or want to relive the past. In a sense, documentary is a dynamic bridge between the past and the future[10]. The link that this bridge builds on is the images that move the feelings and thoughts of the followers into action[11]. In general, the image can be defined as expressing of subconscious voluntary or involuntary with certain connotations[12]. Images allows us to express ourselves in the face of social, political, individual or psychological events in the modern world we live in. While these meaningful structures are not formed only after the process of individual meaning, they pass through an interpretive filter that collective consciousness contributes to. They are systematic constructs that give information about the general tendency of the society in which the artist lives, beyond the reflection of his own inner world [13]. In the outward expression of the images of collective memory through documentary like every branch of art, while those living in the past play an active role, the imitations that make concrete and otherization manifest the clues of the world of social thought. The image is shaped not

only by visual and fictional symbols but by society, ideology, social and historical events, beliefs [14]. In the formation of the images, the identity of the director, the geography lives in, the cultural and political accumulation of him/her play an active role. In the documentaries of American and Turkish cinema, the Armenian identity shaped the fact that Turks and Armenians have a common past in history, and the effects of political, cultural and social events of two past and present times on the two nations are reflected in cultural life. In this context the Armenian identity is reflected with victim of genocide through genocide claim in the documentaries focused on 1915 Armenian deportation in the United States. In these documentaries, the tangible signs related to the Armenian identity are the flag and the church (sign of the cross). On the other hand, it is possible to see the effects of the process of ideological change in the country regarding the Armenian issue in the documents after 2007 in Turkey. In the documents before 2007, the main point was the 1915 Armenian deportation, while the Armenian identity is reflected through the images of "homeland traitor", "insurgent" and "enemy of Turk". In the documentaries in 2007 and after, the Armenian identity was made visible with the images of "disintegration", "homelessness", "disintegration", "statelessness" in the context of "search for history", "dialogue and solution contribution". History, memory, deportation and confrontation cases were questioned over Armenian identity in the documentaries in Turkey. Apart from these intangible images, the tangible images that refer to the Armenian identity and the roots of this identity in Anatolia are the remains of houses, churches and graves in Anatolia.

### A. Flag and Homeland

According to Habermas: "we-consciousness" is the common heritage of ethnic and national community based on cultural identity and blood relativity in those who share the common belief, who regard themselves as 'members' of the same community and thus isolated themselves[15]. The main factors that constitute 'consciousness' in Armenian identity are geographical, historical, cultural and political unity[16]. Armenia's independence, statelessness and landlessness for the Armenians in the diaspora means that the obstacles in front of the rootlessness have been raised. For many Armenians living in diaspora, Armenia is the place where the ideal of Armenian identity is raised. Armenia is motherland for the Armenians who live geographically miles away, and for the diaspora Armenians Armenia's development and continue this development is important. Because Armenia is a homeland that is likely to return someday[17]. This belief suppresses the feelings of being stateless of diaspora Armenians a hundred years ago from their land and their homeland.



Fig. 1: „The Armenians A Story of Survival“(2001),Andrew Goldberg Fig. 2 : „Images of the Armenian Spirit“(2003), Yön: Muffie Dunn



The Armenian flag we saw in the opening of the documentary *A Look Through Our Eyes* (2003) also refers to the element of geographical unity that plays an active role in the formation of the Armenian identity. Symbols such as flag, money, anthem, uniform, monument and celebration remind people of their common heritage, cultural heritage and political unity. Thus, the common identity and belonging feelings are strengthened through the re-affirmation of identity and unity[18]. In the national structure of the 20th century, the basic element that separates societies from each other is nation and flag. It is loaded with meanings to the nation and to the flag that symbolizes the nation[19].

### B. Victim/1915

The events of 1915 are the main factor in the formation of collective consciousness, in the perspective of historical unity, from the components of the Armenian ethnic identity. The link established with the historical past, which requires the non-stationary nature of the collective identity, allows for the continuation of the construction of identity, and this continuity



Fig. 3 : „The Armenian Genocide“(2006);Andrew Goldberg



Fig. 4:The Images of Armenian Spirit (2003); Muffie Dunn

The Genocide Monument, located in American-made documentaries, is the most obvious symbol for the past to be reminded. The feelings that remind us of this symbol throughout the documentaries and that it does not allow forgotten are the feelings of injustice and victimization. The Armenians, who continue their lives with their psychological burden of what they have witnessed and witness, also transmit this burden to the new generations in various forms[23]. In *Germany and the Secret Genocide* (2003), Elmassian calls Armenian: "You should never forget our tears, our tears. We walked through the dead. We were hungry, thirsty, we had nothing to eat nor anything to wear. Wherever they were taking us, we were going there. I do not know what our crime is." Another eyewitness in the document says that what was done to Armenia is inhuman and that no Armenian will ever forget it.

### C. Road, Travel, Traveller

After 2000, we often encounter the road, travel and traveller images in Armenian identity-focused documentaries in Turkish cinema. Travelling is not only a relocation or a physical act, but a spiritual travel at the same time. In *Hush* (2009), director

continues for generations. The main element in the formation of the Armenian collective identity is the 1915 deportation and the disaster comes with that. For the diaspora away from the motherland, the victimization based on 1915 narrative in the construction of Armenian identity and the "we" consciousness is indispensable [20]. According to Panossian: "The genocide, in which the Armenians were directly or indirectly influenced, became the determinant of the Armenian identity. Particularly, being Armenian in the diaspora means to be left behind from the genocide, on the other hand it means to be a member of the victim society. The mentality of being the victim of the most important part of the Armenian identity throughout the 21st century is rooted in the Armenian collective consciousness" [21]. The effects of deportation observed today on Armenian identity are the feelings of injustice and victimization [22]. While this emotion shaped around the question such as "Why that happened to us, What is our guilty, Why are we here?" also the past is questioning.

Berke Baş continues to trace the Armenians who are living or lived in Ordu while rediscovering the life story of her grandmother Nahide along with other family members on the travel of her ancestor's land to Ordu. This individual travel begins remember the past collectively, and the travel that begins in now continues within the past. Fethiye Çetin in *Habap Fountains: The story of a Restoration* (2012), goes to the Habap to restore the fountains which was built in 1634 but ruined now with the Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian youth from different regions of Turkey and abroad. However, Fethiye Çetin does not only go to Habap but this village, where her grandmother once lived, is a village where thousands of Armenians lived before 1915. In this journey Çetin travels to the stories of the Armenians of Habap who had to leave their families in 1915 like her grandmother. In other words, the travel includes the inner transformation of the individual to experience self-empowerment in a geography and to achieve his /her emancipation[24]. While Saroyan traveling towards Bitlis, from his childhood until now reaching to his own history, the past, which affects him and his family until now reach us with his strings, from Saroyan's eyes. In her documentary *Diyar* (2013) director Devrim Akkaya's own

inner journey was given as part of the documentary while she is travelling to Malatya to find the grave of her great-grandfather. She notices that generations of traumatic periods have begun to question their own roots in a therapy study on how they are influenced by migration, child mortality, murder, and rejection. The sense of loneliness and belong to nowhere brings to her mind her grandfather [25]. In *Pure State of the soul* (2013) the travel of director Uğur Egemen İres towards the true identity of his grandfather Yusuf İres actually, is the journey of discovering his own identity. According to İres, the whole story begins with the debate between grandfather and grandmother, the secret his grandfather reveals overthrows all the facts he knows and believes and İres relearn everything about his family from that day on. In the documentary "*I Left my Shoes in Istanbul*" (2013), we follow Sako Arian's journey from Beirut to Istanbul. When Arian arrives in Istanbul, he visits churches, cemeteries, schools, associations, newspapers and foundations, walk in the streets, take a ferry. And everywhere he goes he finds a trace of his own history. In this journey, Arian discovers that the roots he has come through are here. The journey made in the documentaries is the journey to the geography or roots that have been in the past.

#### *D. Rootless and Scatter*

The houses at the back of their memories that immigrant families have to leave behind and the bonds of belonging with their geography that they leave behind become visible in their identities. Where is the house? Is it a single place, multiple places, or both? How many homes can we have? The house is our living sanctuary. Outside is our sheltered area where we do not have to explain ourselves. The house is not just a wall surrounded by the four sides we live in. A living event is sometimes a thought, often a memory. While we live in the house, the house roots in us. The house is as individual as our thoughts and it belongs to us. Even if we leave the house and the place we live in, our home always comes with us [26]. Since the house is often not a concrete place, feeling at home is fundamentally closely related to memory. We all have feelings and memories about our home. The tangible signs that refer to the Armenian identity and the root of this identity in Anatolia in the *Beginnings* (2013) are the ruins of houses and churches and signs of the crosses on the walls of the houses made of these stones in the villages of Mus the youth visited. The ruined Marine Church, the Surp Karabet Monastery, the remains of the church in Kırköy are images describing the disintegration, statelessness, and homelessness of the Armenian identity. On the other hand, the diaspora that connects with many houses never has a specific house. The fact that those who have to abandon the homeland have to live in different geographies of the diaspora has caused the distribution of the other family members and their identities with the geography left behind. In *Talking Photographs* (2009), Sham-born Viven describes the scattering of her family as follows: "*At present, only the guest in Geben is in fact. We would be living side by side with our families and with our loved ones here. We are now far away from each*

*other and scattered.* "

### III. CONCLUSION

A documentary is a type of film that responds to the aspirations of a person or a community for the past, and conveys this valuable accumulation of the past to generations in the context of artistic interpretations. In other words, the documentary film plays a protective role in conveying social experiences that are reminiscent of past and turning into past into future generations. In this respect, the documentary preserves time and conveys precious moments in time to the future. On the other hand, people in the documentary are positioned with feelings of grief, anger, hope, or empathy. This person may be the director, the person who stands out in the documentary or the audience will react. These emotions are social emotions that are viewed not only from individual but from the social environment and the public space shaped by different media tools. In this context, the viewer, the producer-director and the society are interconnected through emotions. As a result, there may be hope that shape the purpose-representation of the document to which the individuals are desperately-unhappy-worried. The documentary tells us that this is not necessarily the case, that it can be changed, or that those who lived in the past should not be repeated. These representations underscore what can be achieved if believed and intended, if desired [28]. Bezjian thinks that a documentary is not sufficient to solve the problem between the two nations, but that prejudiced approaches will play an important role in developing new conception outside of well-used or abused stereotypes, and that new approaches with the effect of accelerating its development, it may also be the power to overcome the obstacles in front of the new perspective [29]. In this context, the documentaries after 2007 in Turkey are regarded as important in terms of empathy and positive development of the relationship between two ethnicity. In these documentaries, rather than being associated with the Armenian identity in the collective context of 1915, individual experiences have been carried on the scene. In addition, the proximity of the local people in these documents is remarkable in their visit to the land where the ancestors of the Armenians from Diaspora or Armenia. On the other hand, the fact that the Armenian families have lived in the past and that these experiences have been felt by Armenian have been widely shared with the documentary, which increases the feeling of empathy. In addition, the presentation of individual stories in the documentaries in Turkish cinema brought together collective recall, and this approach presented the individual experiences to the attention of the public rather than the collective evaluation of the past. On the other hand, the dominant factor in the *Sarı Gelin* (2003) and *Büyük Yalan* (2007) documentaries, and the documentaries in American cinema about what happened 1915 in American there are anger and sorrow except empathy and hope. It has been seen that these elements are used in the same documentary archives along the documentaries, given as little as possible to the

opposing views, and in the cases where they are given, the opinions that will disintegrate immediately take place and the feeling of empathy is reduced as well as the discussion of truth and propaganda. This situation has been evaluated as another indication that the documentary can be shaped in different ways according to the director, the target mass and the message he wants to give. The influence of the collective memory in the approach to the identities that the documentary represents with the claim of truth brings with it a biased perspective. Contrary to the idea that it can be represented in the cinema as if it is real, Kaplan predicts that the cinema will be regarded as a means of changing the audience's expectations and assumptions about life instead [30]. The documentaries effect on the audiences in this regard is worth considering. From this point, it should be underlined that while the collective memory of the society in which the director lives is effective in the productions that the documentary is tied to by his belonging ties or other identities, the object must be avoided from the propagandism preliminarily. Such approaches will produce more objective documentaries and a specific purpose that will bring the documentary closer to reality from productions serving prejudice.

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