

Hello, It's Me!

FRUNZE DOVLATYAN

1966

Hello, It's Me! (1966) is a layered film, one which reflects on memory, loss and life, regained through a portrait of Artyom, a physicist and a man in mourning. Shot in elegiac and melancholy black and white, the film's gentle soundtrack and cinematography perfectly communicate the malaise of its main character, a condition of dignified sadness and a gentle, quiet hope.

Artyom lost his love Lyusya during the war. The events that led to his knowledge of this are revealed slowly, heartbreakingly and in a non-linear fashion. Despite its non-linearity however, the strands of past and present woven through the film, are easy to follow. This is not an abstract reflection on the state of the human mind, rather a film that mimics the peaks and troughs of trauma and healing. We see the little girl who bears the news of Lyusya's departure, standing under popular children's store 'Children's World', long before her significance to us as viewers becomes clear. Slowly, we discover the little girl was sent by Lyusya to their agreed meeting place to bring Artyom the news that she is leaving for the front. In a letter Artyom eventually receives from Lyusya, which clarifies her situation further, she says, 'I've told everything to a tiny little girl. I don't know whether she will find you.' Whilst Artyom's loss is individualised, Dovlatyan's film powerfully evokes the dislocated chaos and instability suffered by loved ones during the Second World War. In a flashback to Moscow, plaintive announcements are heard over the main square. Messages are sent by people desperately seeking news of their loved ones. The people that congregate are looking for a message too. There is no guarantee that these will be the right people: a young man seeks his mother and another message states, 'It's been two years since we last saw one another.' People continue to live in potentially senseless hope.

Outside this dark, emotional epicentre of memory and grief, the plot in the present focuses on Artyom and his colleagues' quest to build a cosmology laboratory in Armenia's beautiful Aragat mountains. Artyom, who is based on the real life physicist Artem Alikhanian, becomes a symbol for the reclamation of Armenian achievement and Armenian identity. This is clearly expressed in the mission to build a laboratory in Armenia in the first place.

Throughout the film Artyom is met with scepticism and frequently asked the question, 'Why not Moscow?' To which he replies, 'What made you think Moscow, Moscow?'

The 1960s in Armenia was a very sensitive time, one which heralded an enormous cultural turn away from Moscow-centric power, into national pride and remembrance for those tragically lost during the genocide. 1965 saw the first demonstrations in Yerevan, demanding recognition of that genocide and 1967 saw the first memorial established. This is important to note, as in the decades directly proceeding the 1960s, Armenians had largely lived in a Russified state. It was a huge cultural shift, and one that filtered through into everything, from the revival of internal infrastructure, as the laboratory project represents, to in the way that Armenians considered their own history and language. The film begins with the 1966 victory of Armenian grandmaster, Tigran Petrosian's victory in the world championship over Russian player Boris Spassky. The subtext of this scene is clear, but it being positioned as the film's opening sequence also gives it inordinate value. The people eagerly watching in the square cheer and celebrate. There is a new focus, not only on the victories of Armenia, but on people's happiness too.

Artyom, whose painful memories live inside him is a figure who is keeping the joy and beauty of what he has lost alive. This makes him synonymous with Armenia's future in a way where that individualisation is a reflection of the greater cultural whole. Karen Kalantar, the film critic, noted that Artyom's own memories are expressed as a 'wider and deeper memory, the national memory of the Armenians.' But the film's unique power lies in its hope; and the ability of an individual, and a country, to rebuild. As Artyom continues to live, with the people he loved still with him, he goes on to find new love and a new life. However, the pull of the old and the places and people that made him remain deep and resonant, even as his dear friends pass into the past. In the last scene of the film he walks through the ruins of an old fortified town in the mountains, touching his bare feet to his native land. When a Priest asks him whether he got lost, he replies, 'Father, I know these lands well.'