

Review | Here, Elsewhere — documenting daily life during Nagorno-Karabakh's final days

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★★★★■

Lebanese–Armenian director Comes Chahbazian created this documentary from first-hand footage collected by a Stepanakert resident and his wife in 2023.

Over 200 days into the Lachin blockade, and with signs of a war on the horizon, Brussels-based filmmaker Comes Chahbazian asked his friend Artsiv to film his daily life in Nagorno-Karabakh, the footage and written updates building a portrait of a society under siege.

The first shot Artsiv takes is of his wife Tatev and five children walking down a dirt street. 'Don't you think everything looks strangely normal?', Artsiv asks via a first-person narration derived from the letters sent to Chahbazian.

What isn't captured by the camera are the long lines for food that never comes, the eeriness of empty streets that were once full of busy traffic. As Artsiv humorously puts it, Stepanakert has become an eco-friendly capital city due to the Azerbaijani blockade.

The footage Artsiv, and later Tatev, capture is strikingly mundane: plastic bags being washed and hung to dry, dinner being served, fussy children being soothed. Yet, being able to film these aspects of life provides a kind of 'exorcism' from the stress of their uncertain future.

Food is an ever-present preoccupation for Nagorno-Karabakh residents. Artsiv's children complain about the lack of bread, complaining to Tatev that they cannot eat cooked squash without it. Nagorno-Karabakh volunteers cook two hedgehogs on a fire for their dinner meal. Yet, as the narration explains, despite the ongoing shortages, everyone helps their neighbours with what they can, this solidarity undergirding the film.

The film takes a darker turn, however, as Azerbaijan begins its last full-scale offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. At times, it feels as if Artsiv and Tatev have become too reliant on the camera — in one scene, as the city is shelled by Azerbaijani forces during the night, one of their sons begs them to stop filming in near tears. It is a moment when Artsiv must decide whether to remain a documentary filmmaker or a father who comforts his children in their distress.

It is not long before Nagorno-Karabakh surrenders, which Chahbazian cleverly contrasts with the biblical phrase like a lamb to slaughter, placing the narration of Artsiv's experiences of the surrender against imagery of a sheep in grass.

Artsiv and Tatev continue their filming as Stepanakert empties, its residents seeking safety in Armenia. Soon enough, the family also follows, filming their packing process and eventual days-long journey on the road out.

The film continues in Armenia, showing their transition to life in a new country. They visit supermarkets, overwhelmed by the options available; the kids spend time watching videos on their phones, reminiscent of youth everywhere. Yet, at the same time, they hold their memories of their home in Nagorno-Karabakh close. Despite leaving many things behind, including brand-new shoes,

Tatev packed all of their unused ration cards, telling Artsiv 'It's so we remember'.

Yet, while they remember, they feel Armenians do not understand the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, viewing the Christmas and New Year's celebrations in Yerevan with distaste. Artsiv describes being surrounded by 'indifferent people', who don't understand.

Even so, life continues. Chahbazian ends the film on a note of hope, with Artsiv and Tatev having rebuilt their lives in Armenia, including Tatev returning to her main livelihood and passion of painting. And both still hope to return to their homeland in Nagorno-Karabakh one day.

Film details: *Here, Elsewhere* (2026), directed by Comes Chahbazian. The film was screened on 14 July 2026 in Yerevan as part of the 23rd Golden Apricot International Film Festival.

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