

Learning to Migrate Before Learning to Fly Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom? Director: Rena Lusin Bitmez. 2019. 96 minutes

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[See table of contents](#)

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Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom? Learning to Migrate Before Learning to Fly

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FILM REVIEW

Rena Lusin Bitmez (Director). (2019). *Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom?* [Film]. RenaArt Film. (96 minutes)

HISTORY Published 23 August 2022

Rena Lusin Bitmez's debut documentary *Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom?* explores the daily struggles of four Armenian children—Ruzanna Babaian, Antranik Yedigarian, Hasmik Vertersian, and Harutyun Bogosian—who migrated with their families to Istanbul. Filmed over the course of eight years, the documentary depicts an intimate portrait of the children's lives. This includes not only their immigrant struggles but also their day-to-day interpersonal relationships.

The film starts by showing Antranik and a slightly older boy, Suren, as they take a casual walk on the seaside. Their conversation lays out the central themes of the film: economic instability, uncertainty of the future, longing for the home country, fear of deportation, and, most importantly, the importance

of education.

The children attend a makeshift school located in the basement cafeteria of an Armenian church. Their educators are volunteer instructors. Classes include Armenian, English, literature, music, and folk dance. The school remains the children's sole connection to the outside world, where their mobility is restricted because of fears of deportation. Besides school-based instruction, more socially situated, informal forms of learning also exist within the home environment. Antranik's mother, a former journalist and volunteer school instructor, teaches children how to draw, for example. Similarly, Ruzanna is practising on the musical keyboard with her mother.

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The prospect of education occupies almost all discussions among children. At times, we see them connecting with their friends back home, through Skype, and exchanging details about their educational pathways. Other times, conversations are dominated by complex trade-offs between income-earning activities and schooling. For instance, one conversation demonstrates the children's desperation regarding university acceptance in Turkey. The children strive to make up for the formal education they would normally be receiving in Armenia, and the uncertainty as to how long they would have to be living as immigrants is adding to the problem.

Armenians began to immigrate to Turkey after Armenia's declaration of independence in 1991 (Körükmez, 2013). The country's political turmoil, corruption, and economic hardship triggered by the Soviet Union's dissolution worsened around this period, and despite all the negative connotations associated with Armenians in Turkish mainstream media, migrating to Turkey is oftentimes seen as a more viable economic option than migrating to countries such as Russia, Europe, or the United States, due to the ever-decreasing currency rate in Turkey since the mid-2010s.

Armenians are not the only immigrant group in Turkey. However, the discussions surrounding them differ from those of other migrant groups, as Turkey has an official minority of Armenians. Media and public representation of Armenians in Turkey are loaded with negative attributions. Nonetheless, the particularities of being Armenian in Turkey are nowhere to be found in this documentary. The film has no interest in opening a discussion of the events of 1915 or the treatment of Armenians in Turkey in the present. Its focus is strictly on the lives and struggles of these four characters,

who happen to be immigrant Armenian children. The children's families do not interact with the minority Armenian population either. In an interview conducted with Bitmez (personal communication, February 6, 2021), she pointed out that the immigrant Armenians have no connection whatsoever with the minority Armenians living in Turkey.

Similarly, characters are not seen interacting with Turks at any point in the film, except for the short conversations Hasmik's mother has with vendors at the neighbourhood market. It appears that no socializing happens and no new relationships are formed in the host country. At school, for instance, children receive English lessons but not Turkish. The narrative makes clear that these individuals are not there to stay but to return. The building they reside in is a temporary shelter, a home away from home where the children spend some years of their lives, hoping to go back sooner than later.

Stylistically, **Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom?** charts a course distinct from many prominent documentary films centring on forced migration. This is due to the fact that Bitmez's earlier work consists mainly of scripted television content. She has also extensively worked with prominent Turkish directors known for their fictional work. As such, Bitmez builds her documentary's narration by way of dramaturgical construction, allowing the viewer to develop attachment towards its characters in a similar way as happens in fiction. There are no interviews with the subjects, no voice-over narration, and no trace of the filmmaker within the universe of the film in any form. Using a cinema vérité style, the camera simply records the action unfolding in front of it without any intervention. The use of camera, especially inside the home, is almost entirely static. Instead of following the characters around, the camera allows them to move

freely in and out of the frame. A sense of intimacy is created as families have accepted a film crew into their private space. The camera practically lives with the children, even capturing such private moments as Harutik taking a bath and Hasmik getting lectured by her mother. However, this very same absence of boundaries does not make the viewer uncomfortable in any way. To the contrary, this intimacy is created with respect, through physical distance and minimal camera movements.

We see the children at an outside location, other than their street or their schoolyard, at only a few moments in the film. The majority of the 90-minute documentary takes place inside the multi-storey building where Hasmik, Ruzanna, and Harutyun live. The few shots that show the outside world comprise the children sitting in front of the house, the children playing in the school's backyard during recreation, and, most recurring of all, the view of the street from their windows and tiny balconies. The building's staircases are both the children's playground and the connection between their homes. Running up and down the stairs is their main entertainment. It is from the stairs that they call out to one another to play, to share a meal, and also where they get yelled at by the adults for being too loud. The stairs that lead to the main entrance of the building are the most appealing. The door that opens out to the street is one of mystery, fear, and excitement.

Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom? does more than document the strug-

gles of Armenian immigrants. The film places its subjects in a mechanism of narrative storytelling, where the viewer forms an intimate relationship with the film that goes beyond understanding and caring about its characters. The viewer becomes a part of their close-knit community. This closeness, combined with the subtlety of its narration and its conscious preference not to delve into political discussions, is what makes **Do You Think God Loves Immigrant Kids, Mom?** stand out among countless representations of "adulthood" in migratory experiences. It is a humble yet utterly sincere invitation to the world of Ruzanna, Antranik, Hasmik, and Harutyun.

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