

## In Other Words: Poetic Licence and the Incarnation of History

In 1998, I was nominated for two Academy Awards for writing and directing the feature film *The Sweet Hereafter*. This followed on the heels of the film having won three prizes at Cannes, and appearing on over 250 top ten lists for that year. In the weeks leading up to the Oscars, I was flown back and forth to New York and Los Angeles, where I was presented at various film industry functions, interviewed on national television, and displayed at any social event where I would be seen. Visibility is an essential ingredient of fame. In my field, being nominated for an Academy Award was the height of fame.

I didn't win either of the awards that night. *Titanic*, true to its title, swept through a ceremony that culminated in an uneasy moment when its director – James Cameron – stood in front of the global audience and asked for a few moments of silence in observation of the lives that had been lost on that ill-fated ship. I'll never forget the disturbing sense of power that Cameron exercised with that gesture. A few days before, all the nominees had been rigorously coached to keep their acceptance speeches as short as possible. Yet here was this man, the self-proclaimed 'King of the World,' consuming one of the most valuable commodities in that world – airtime during the internationally broadcast Academy Awards – to honour the dead.

I couldn't help but feel that he was also honouring something else. James Cameron was demonstrating his power to *make* that statement. As we in the audience sat dutifully in silence to pay tribute to those lost souls that perished on the *Titanic*, I noticed several Hollywood producers glancing at each other incredulously. Years before, when he won his award for *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg hadn't gone quite that far. And here we all were, heads bowed in silence to commemorate a group of people we could now only associate with a special effects spectacle rather than with a specific historical event. Or had the movie become the historical event? Had the film *Titanic* somehow bulldozed its way into our collective psyche in such a manner that it became, in effect, a living experience of what it meant to be there? Is this what history has become in our culture: a set of indicators that simulate the experience of what things must have meant?

The next morning, I was flown back to Toronto. The party was over. Or I should say, the parties. All night long, I had witnessed the elite of Hollywood at a number of social events at a number of legendary places –

the Governors Ball, Chasens, Mortons. Everyone was talking about Cameron's gesture. 'Can you *believe* what he did?' 'That he'd have the balls?' By the end of the evening, there was no doubt in my mind as to what had been consecrated in that outrageously long vow of silence Cameron had imposed on Hollywood and the rest of the world that night - what had made the gesture so unsettling. In those precious moments of primetime silence Cameron demonstrated with staggering effect the privilege of commemorative exclusivity. He had staked his claim on the public imagination in order to impose on the audience the concept that they should remember what he *wanted* them to remember. His position had allowed him to set an agenda, and any reference he might have made to any other victims of tragedy - an appeal, say, to *all* those who had lost their lives on the sea - would only dilute the impact of his claim. There was no room for inclusiveness. There was, after all, a product to pitch. *Titanic*. And in Cameron's view, perhaps, anything to extend the power of this brand was acceptable. This, of course, is the brutal reality of any cause. No matter what its moral significance - its right to be remembered - it is at the mercy of those individuals who choose to attach themselves to its needs. From charities to historical calamities to plagues and to famines, we are in need of spokespeople who can attach a public face to an issue. In a world of victims, only the most ostentatious will be noticed. In victim culture, this constitutes survival of the fittest.

I had always wanted to make a film about the Armenian Genocide of 1915. I came to Canada at the age of two from Egypt, where both my parents were born. My father's mother - whom I never met - was an orphan of this terrible event, and my grandfather - whom I also never knew - narrowly escaped the wholesale slaughter of my race in the provinces of Eastern Turkey. When we arrived in Canada in 1962, my parents made the curious decision to move the family to Victoria, British Columbia. Here, in the westernmost city of the country, I was raised without the three pillars of Armenian identity. There was no community, no Armenian church, and, though Armenian was my mother tongue, I refused to speak it at home and it too was soon lost. Without the community, church, or language, my path towards complete cultural assimilation was virtually assured.

I arrived in Toronto in the fall of 1978. Convinced that I would make an excellent diplomat, I enrolled myself in the study of International Relations at Trinity College at the University of Toronto. At this point, my path was interrupted by two fortuitous meetings. The chaplain of Trinity College, Harold Nahabedian, was Armenian. I began to take Armenian lessons from him in an attempt to retrieve my mother tongue. Secondly, there was a very active Armenian Students' Association on campus, and I became a member. Although I was aware of the Armenian Genocide, its full impact was suddenly revealed to me, and I began to gear all my studies to the analysis



of this event. My graduating thesis was an independent studies project on Western responses to the Armenian call for national self-determination on the part of Armenians in the aftermath of this atrocity.

I also began to write film reviews for the campus Newspaper (*The Newspaper*, not *The Varsity*) and immersed myself in film culture, starting to make my first short films at the University's Hart House Film Board. During these initial months in Toronto, my life became a blur as I tried to juggle all these activities – my regular academic courses, my reintroduction into Armenian culture, and my growing fascination with film criticism and theory – until one evening in the late fall all these pursuits became focused on one event. The Alan Parker movie *Midnight Express* had been gathering an increasing amount of controversy since its premiere at the Toronto Film Festival some months before. The story concerned a young man – Billy Hayes – who gets caught smuggling drugs in Turkey. The film shows his horrific journey through the living hell of a modern Turkish prison, where the inmates are subject to the most inhumane and brutal treatment imaginable. Over the years, the film has come to represent, from the Turkish point of view, the supreme example of anti-Turkish propaganda. Indeed, when rumors about the production of *Ararat* first began to circulate among the Turkish media, the initial fear was that my film would be the New *Midnight Express*.

I'd like to read to you some passages from the article I wrote in *The Newspaper* twenty-five years ago.

Upon arriving at the Hyland Theatre last Friday night, the audience was confronted by a group of agitated young men distributing pamphlets to the crowd, pamphlets boldly professing to expose 'The Other Side of Midnight Express'. The document charges, '*Midnight Express* is a cheap and racist film aimed at making fast millions by twisting facts and condemning other nations.' ... *Midnight Express* does have the potential to create in the mind of its audience that Turks are all sadistic monsters, and it is because of this biased view that the film will never enter the ranks of great cinema. The image is simply not true. What must be questioned, however, is the Turkish government; a government which gathered its population together in 1915 to incite hatred against its Armenian citizens, and a government which is now trying to suppress the release of this major motion picture.

On that evening, twenty-five years ago, I suddenly realized the power of cinema to make people believe that what they were seeing was absolutely real. A film has the ability to enter into the viewer's mind in a seemingly immediate way and, for this reason, it is both a hugely exciting artistic form and an ideal instrument of propaganda. Sometimes, the line between the two is very thin. There is no doubt that a film like *Midnight Express* perpetuated negative and highly damaging images of Turks. On the other

hand, the film was supposedly based on facts. Was it as simple as Mark Twain's advice that you had to 'First get your facts. Then do with them as you will'? And why *were* the screenwriter, Oliver Stone, and the director, Alan Parker, representing the Turkish characters in the extreme way they were shown? Was it in order to serve the needs of the story? What were the needs of the story?

In 1997, Guy Vanderhaeghe won the Governor-General's award for *The Englishman's Boy*, a novel based on the 1873 massacre of Assiniboine Indians, coupled with the entirely invented story of a Hollywood producer who uses the incident to make a proto-fascistic movie, what Vanderhaeghe refers to as a 'hymn to Manifest Destiny.' Giving a speech at York University in Toronto, Vanderhaeghe – who once had aspirations to become an academic historian – said that writing his book was far more difficult than he had anticipated. Remnants of his historical training left him wary of the impulse of the novelist, and the novelist was equally leery of the historian. One moment, he found himself agreeing with historians who regard 'faction' or 'factory' as 'the work of magpies who pick all the shiny, entertaining bits from the past, tart them up even more, and try to pass their gaudy stews off as the real goods.' The next minute, he would find himself siding with writers of fiction, asking himself, 'How can historians take promising material, suck the blood from it, and then proudly exhibit the corpses to the only people who could possibly be interested in poking them for signs of life, other professional historians?'<sup>1</sup>

In writing *The Englishman's Boy*, Vanderhaeghe was continually asking his divided self what he was up to, or should be up to. At the root of his confusion was indecision about which hat to wear. He found his solution in a tactic which, according to him, historical novelists have traditionally deployed to skirt the problems of authority and accuracy – to focus on a little-explored incident whose principal players were largely unknown. In Vanderhaeghe's own words, 'The public's unfamiliarity with the Cypress Hills Massacre, the contradictory accounts of what actually occurred there, as well as my own conviction that the destiny of Canada was influenced by an obscure border affray acted out on the periphery of the two empires, supplied me with plenty of room to maneuver as a novelist.'<sup>2</sup>

In making a film about the Armenian Genocide of 1915, I was faced with two additional burdens. While people may not have known about the details of the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873, there was a template in the reader's mind of what archetype to set the story against. This was, after all,

1 *National Post*, Saturday, 22 July 2000, B11. Vanderhaeghe's article is excerpted from a speech given at York University to the Historians and Their Audiences Conference, as part of the Millennial Wisdom Symposium organized by the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies.

2 Ibid.



a story about Cowboys and Indians. The basic terrain of the story existed in the popular consciousness. On the other hand, it's difficult to reference a popular movie that conjures up images of Eastern Anatolia in the late days of the Ottoman Empire.

The second, and infinitely more monumental issue I had to contend with was the denial of this historical event. Without going into the grisly details of the Armenian Genocide, it is important to note that after the collapse of the Young Turk Government in 1918 the new Turkish government arrested several hundred former party leaders who were suspected of direct roles in the mass deportations and massacres. While many of these criminals had fled their country for Germany (their wartime ally, which then granted them asylum), many were left behind who had collaborated in the genocide, including Turkish state and local administrators, party activists, policemen, a variety of specialists in mass violence, and businessmen and farmers who had seized Armenian property. Cases were prepared against these criminals for murder, treason, theft, and similar offences under Turkish law.

What happened next is one of the most staggeringly cynical acts of the last century. While the new Turkish authorities carried out a series of trials during 1919 and 1920 – placing on the public record an important collection of confessions by former Young Turk leaders, as well as secret state and party papers concerning the tactics of deportation and mass murder – these trials were strongly opposed by the rising nationalist movement led by Mustapha Kemal. Kemal, later known as Atatürk, was convinced that these trials were a symbol of foreign efforts to dismember Turkey. In his book *The Splendid Blond Beast: Money, Law and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Christopher Simpson provides a detailed account of what transpired. After the First World War, Britain, France, and the United States began to negotiate with each other in secret as to how best to divide up the vast oil and mineral wealth of Turkey's Ottoman Empire. Kemal, according to Simpson, skilfully played the three powers against each other and insisted on amnesty for the Young Turks as part of the price for their support in the division of the defunct empire. Simpson writes that 'though often overlooked today, the Ottoman holdings were of extraordinary value, perhaps the richest imperial treasure since the European seizure of the New World four centuries earlier. The empire had been eroding for decades, but by the time of the Turkish defeat in World War I, it still included most of what is today Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and the oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. The European governments sensed that the time had come to seize this rich prize' (32).

Thus, even though the three allies had pushed for tough punishment for the Young Turk criminals, including the establishment of an independent Armenian republic in Northeastern Turkey, they could not decide among themselves how best to divide the rich oil fields of the former Empire.

Ataturk, who by the end of 1920 had established a rival government in Ankara, took advantage of this indecision not only to put pressure on the shaky Turkish government of Istanbul to shut down the criminal trials of the Young Turks, but also to abrogate the Treaty of Sevres, the Allied document that granted the Armenians a homeland. In return, he promised the Allies complete co-operation in gaining access to the valuable oilfields. Written in 1923 and now preserved in the National Archives in Washington, DC, a revealing internal document by Allen Dulles of the US State Department states: 'Confidentially, the State Department is in a bind. Our task would be simple if the reports of the atrocities could be declared untrue or even exaggerated, but the evidence, alas, is irrefutable.'<sup>3</sup>

In the years that followed, a remarkable shift in US government behaviour and media content took place as the State Department - motivated by the desire to secure access to the vast untapped resources of former Ottoman territories - began to turn the US public towards Turkey. While the sufferings of Armenia had been widely acknowledged during the war years, recognition of the Genocide began to recede in accordance with State Department plans.

I have made this seeming digression because, when talking about the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide, an important point has to be made. Turkey has only been able to sustain this denial because it has been aided and abetted by the West. While France has recently acknowledged the Genocide, it still runs counter to general Western interests to pursue this matter with Turkey. The denial has been universally sustained and meticulously pursued. While every single serious scholar of holocaust has substantiated this terrible tragedy, official Turkish sources, as well as supposedly objective academics, continue to perpetuate the lie.

From the moment I began to write *Ararat*, the images of those young men handing out pamphlets before the screening of *Midnight Express* so many years ago came flooding back. I could anticipate that any film that presented the Armenian Genocide would be accused, from a Turkish point of view, of perpetuating stereotypes. Yet from an Armenian perspective - in terms of stories we had been told over and over again from the time we were children - the barbaric and vicious images were very real. In this context, the challenge in telling the story of *Ararat* was threefold: First of all I had to find a way of presenting the strongest and most persistent of cultural beliefs with which I had been raised. Secondly, I needed to examine and question the drives and sources that determined those beliefs. And finally, I had to show the emotional foundations of those beliefs as they persist in our culture today. There are those who may feel that I should have told the story more simply - should have concentrated on the

3 Allen Dulles to Mark Bristol, 21 April 1922, Bristol Papers, RG 45, National Archives, Washington, DC.



film-within-the-film. *Ararat*, from this perspective, should have focused on setting the record straight. But I never saw this as my cinematic responsibility. The events that took place in Eastern Turkey in the spring of 1915 are extremely well documented. Not only do we have the studies of holocaust scholars, numerous eyewitness accounts – including that of the American ambassador to Turkey during those years – and hundreds of newspaper reports, we also have the detailed accounts of German consular heads stationed in every Turkish town that saw its Armenian population decimated. While Turkey will dismiss much of the American, English, and French evidence as being part of the wartime propaganda effort, how can it respond to thousands of documents in the German State Archives? What do Turkish historians have to say about the account of the German consul in Aleppo, reporting to Reichskanzler Bethman Hollweg on 27 July 1915? The German Consul wrote:

... The Turkish government has gone much further than the scope of justified defence measures in an effort to counteract actual and possible subversive Armenian activities, but instead ... are consciously aiming to achieve the downfall of the largest possible proportions of the Armenian people by using methods which are borrowed from antiquity, but which are unworthy of a government that wishes to remain in alliance with Germany. ... it has tried – and of this there can be no doubt – to take advantage of the opportunity to rid itself of the Armenian question. ... It has sacrificed a magnitude of innocent people together with the few guilty ones. ... The Turkish government has driven its Armenian subjects ... into the desert in thousands upon thousands, under the pretext of having to remove them from the war areas, exempting neither the sick nor pregnant women nor the families of conscripted men, has given them both food and water in insufficient quantities and irregularly, has done nothing about the epidemics which have broken out amongst them, has driven the women to such desperation that they set their babies and newborns by the wayside, has sold their adolescent daughters, with the result that they have thrown themselves even with their small children into the river. ... It has had the men illegally shot in lonely places and has the bodies of its victims fed to the dogs and birds of prey.

The German consul concludes his account to the Reichskanzler by stating that the Turkish government would never 'be able to deny responsibility for all that has happened.'<sup>4</sup>

The events that took place are irrefutable. My film does not seek to add anything to the historical record of what happened, since the real issues for

4 German State Archives, document 1915-07-27-DE-001 *From Consulate Aleppo (Roessler) to the Reichskanzler (Bethmann Hollweg)* from <http://www.armenocide.de/armenocide/armgende.sf>

me have been why 'what happened' has been so systematically ignored, and what the effects of that ignorance have been on successive generations. *Ararat* is not so much about the past as it is about the present. It is about the responsibilities of people living now. A film that sought to depict the horrors of the Armenian Genocide would have no doubt been emotional, but it would not have dealt with the issues Armenians must live with today. This is best summarized, in *Ararat*'s script, in the scene where Raffi, the young man working as a driver on the film-within-the-film, is taking Ali, the Turkish-Canadian actor playing Jevdet Bey, back home after a day of shooting. In their conversation, Raffi thanks Ali for doing such an effective job of portraying this monster. Raffi tells the actor that while he has become suspicious of things that are supposed to make him feel anything (he was raised with images of 'the evil Turk'), what Ali has done with his performance has made him 'feel all those things again.' Ali, who is clearly troubled by the stereotype he's unleashed, tries to dismiss Raffi's feelings, saying that the young Armenian was preconditioned to accept those stereotypes. Raffi then makes his deepest confession to this complete stranger. He states, 'My Dad was killed trying to assassinate a Turkish diplomat. I could never understand how he could do that, what it would take him to kill someone. But today, you gave me a sense of what was going on in his head. And I want to thank you.'

On the basis of this scene, we can understand the tremendous complexity of historical transposition. Ali, the actor, transformed himself to play a murderous monster. Raffi's father, because of his political convictions, transformed himself into a killer. Is Raffi moved by Ali's performance because of what the actor incarnated, or because of the process of incarnation? Can this incarnation become a form of testimony? If we acknowledge that survivors might tend to exaggerate the crime, does that make them unreliable? Can an actor, who is only playing a role, give the viewer the critical distance needed to understand an event? Can a director? Can a film? Who has the authority - be it moral, spiritual, or artistic - to tell a story?

In the 1960s Elie Wiesel - the survivor - replaced Anne Frank - the victim - as the incarnation of the Holocaust in the United States. In his book *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, Jeffrey Shandler suggests that in the 1990s Steven Spielberg - the creator of the powerful Holocaust film *Schindler's List* - replaced Elie Wiesel - the survivor - as the new incarnation of the Holocaust in popular culture. This shift in popular interest from individuals who *experienced* the event to those who *represented* the event is a telling sign of our times (Cole, xii). In creating a film that seeks to recount the story of the Armenian Genocide, this becomes even more complicated by the fact that we have no Anne Frank, no Elie Wiesel, and certainly no Spielberg. While many of our most noted figures perished during the Genocide, none of them achieved popular recognition outside



of our culture. Armenians haven't had the intense self-scrutiny ignited by a survivor such as Primo Levi. While a few films have been made about the Genocide, none of these have received commercial distribution in North America. Even the childhood experiences of Arshile Gorky, one of the founders of abstract expressionism and the only 'famous' survivor of the Genocide, are not commonly known. For many people, the glimpses of this great painter's life shown in my film have served as an introduction to this important artist.

Midway through *Ararat*, Ani, an art historian specializing in the work of Arshile Gorky, visits the film studio reproduction of the city of Van, where the historic screen epic, the film-within-the-film, is set. We gather that this is the place where Gorky had spent his youth, and in an earlier scene the filmmakers – unaware of this fact until it is revealed to them by Ani in a lecture they have attended – are now eager to incorporate this one 'famous' survivor into their story. While on set, Ani notices that something is wrong; that the representation of Mount Ararat painted on a backdrop is out of place. She points out that it would not be seen from the city of Van. The filmmakers respond that they have taken 'poetic licence' with the location – a concept that is entirely foreign to the intellectual art historian. Indeed, much of this film-within-the-film seems curiously interpretative. The actors portraying Jevdet Bey and the American missionary Clarence Ussher are acting their parts in a style that borders on historical kitsch. From a contemporary perspective, this film-within-the-film is heavy-handed and old-fashioned. My decision to present the film-within-the-film this way was not born from a sense of perversity or ironic detachment. Instead, I was trying to express what those images of the past would feel like to a culture that had never seen them before. What does it mean to visualize scenes of horror and heroism that history has ignored? Wouldn't they seem exaggerated? My intention in showing the extreme scenes of killings, rapes, and sexual torture was not only to make people think specifically about the Armenian Genocide, but to make the viewer consider the creation of horror and how these histories are created and passed on. The enduring legacy of the Armenian Genocide is not the specific nature of the crime – the last century is rife with unprecedented horrors – but the fact that a calamity of this scale can be systematically denied by its perpetrators and, until recently, the rest of the world. *Ararat* shows how the trauma of living with unresolved history can be transmitted from one generation to the next. The dysfunctional nature of the film-within-the-film is a representation of the state of living with memories that have been denied.

Edward Saroyan, the director of this film-within-the-film, states at various points in *Ararat* that the film is being made for his mother, 'to show how she suffered.' The son is telling the story of a survivor with whom he has had intimate contact. The seventy-year-old director says that this is a

film he always promised he would make for her. It is clearly a project that would generate huge expectations. To make a film today about the Armenian Genocide comes in the trail of a wealth of powerful films that have depicted the Nazi atrocities of the Second World War.

The character of Edward Saroyan would have been at the peak of his career when NBC broadcast the television series *Holocaust* to over 120 million North American viewers over four consecutive evenings in April 1978. When it was screened in West Germany a year later, it attracted 14 million viewers, prompting many to view the broadcast as a turning point in German history. The European broadcast had such a profound effect that in France, the wartime slaughter of Jews ceased to be known as 'genocide' and became known instead as the 'Holocaust' (Vial-Naquet, xii, xviii). Of course, this post-war media attention to the Holocaust began with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1960. With the world press reporting the arrest and then the trial, the process was filmed in its entirety. At the end of each day, an edited selection of clips from the day's proceedings was made available to TV networks. In this way, Eichmann and the trial's parade of Holocaust witnesses was brought directly into living-rooms throughout the world (Cole, 67).

Most impressively, Edward Saroyan would also have been acutely aware of the triumphs of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Awarded seven Oscars at the Academy Awards ceremony in March 1994, *Schindler's List* became, in short order, something more than a movie. Not only did President Bill Clinton publicly urge people to watch the film, but when it premiered on NBC three years later the Ford Motor Company, while buying the advertisement rights for the movie, chose to present the event without commercials. As Tim Cole points out in his book *Selling the Holocaust*, the decision to screen the movie without commercial breaks was in part a response to the criticism which had accompanied the US screening of the television mini-series *Holocaust* almost two decades earlier, but was also a reflection of the degree of reverence accorded to Spielberg's film (74). Watched by over 25 million North Americans at the movie theatre and 65 million when it was shown on television, *Schindler's List* has become 'for the present generation the most important source of historical information affecting popular perceptions of the Holocaust' (Manchel, 24). How could my director of the film-within-the-film, nearing the end of his creative career with his best days long behind him, hope to match this daunting legacy? Would he be successful?

As we can see from the extended passages of Edward Saroyan's *Ararat*, his film looks like something that was made long ago. It seems like a cinematic artifact from another time, since the idea behind making it, while full of earnest good intention, is hardly a reflection of the state of contemporary Armenian consciousness. We've heard all those old stories. We know all the clichés about evil Turks, the scenes of torture, and the stories



of what happened on the death marches. While it's important to show this material – and my film does – it is also important to address the limitations of such traditional representation. While these are the images that every Armenian has been waiting to see, and to have the world see, they do not reflect who we are today. These scenes – in and of themselves – cannot make up for over eighty-five years of denial. Indeed, Raffi's whole journey in the film must be born of his desire to shoot something authentic to what he feels. If Mount Ararat is a painted backdrop on the set, then he will travel to Turkey to take a shot of the real mountain. He dreams of bringing back this image so that it can be 'cut into the film.' He dreams of adding digital effects of people marching. He wants to remake Saroyan's old-fashioned cinematic document into images that 'mean something' to him.

All of the Armenian characters in the film are somehow involved in this process of creating meaning and significance through cultural artifact, from the unknown ancient architects of the churches of Ani and Aghtamar, to the forgotten photographer in the city of Van taking a portrait of Gorky and his mother, to Gorky painting his masterpiece years later, to Ani writing a book about the making of this masterpiece, to Rouben writing a screenplay which will include bits of Ani's book, to Edward Saroyan filming these scenes, to Raffi finally shooting his *own* scene (both on mysterious film and digital video diaries), as well as telling a customs officer about what he witnessed about the making of Edward's movie. Through this McLuhanesque array of hot and cool mediums, all of these characters are involved in a process of cultural transmission. In most of these cases, perceived limitations or inadequacies on the part of one teller lead to a further embellishment on the part of the next. All of the post-genocide stories are driven by a common anxiety: the anxiety of not being heard.

Of course, this all leads back to my role as the filmmaker. I am ultimately responsible for the portrayal of these characters. I have chosen to depict them. These are contemporary characters whose collective history has never been made into a popular miniseries, or a ground-breaking television movie, or an artistically hailed film seen by millions of people all over the world. These are characters who are all somehow involved in the making of a film that doesn't even promise to be that successful. From what we see of Edward's *Ararat* at the premiere, it seems condemned to being dismissed as a piece of pro-Armenian propaganda. But let us understand where these images come from. They arise out of fear. They come from people who feel they have to scream in order to be heard.

Edward's film could never tell a proper narrative, since there's no conclusion to his story. The images in his film, though based on the eye-witness account of Clarence Ussher, are concentrated expressions of what has become our legacy. There has been no chance to develop motifs, or extend dramatic approaches, since the essential story has remained untold. We have important works of literature by writers such as Hagop Oshagan

and Vahan Totovents, but they remain unknown and largely untranslated. The best-known novel about the Armenian Genocide, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, was written by an Austrian Jew, Franz Werfel. Published as a prescient warning call against the horrors of racial hatred in 1933, it was planned as a film to be directed by Rouben Mamoulian until MGM bent to Turkish pressure and the project was abandoned. Over and over again, Turkish sources have steadfastly protected their position, effectively demonizing the victim and rehabilitating the perpetrator.

Thus it came as no surprise that the Turkish government would try to mobilize against *Ararat*. On 8 December 2001, a missive was sent out of Atatürk University and posted on the website Turkish Daily News. The deputy manager of the Turkish-Armenian Relations Centre had stated, 'There is no doubt that the Armenian lobby gave the scenario to Egoyan with some money. Before watching the movie we guess how the historical reality will be diverted. We are sure that no historical source has been used in this film because historical sources show the reality is the opposite.'<sup>5</sup> From the beginning a tone had been set which was ridiculous and insulting. The suggestion that the scenario was not my own and that I had been bribed into making the film was of course absurd. A historical source had indeed been used. Clarence Ussher's book, detailing his experiences as a missionary in Van, provides a harrowing eyewitness account of the events leading up to the genocide, including the passage in the film where Jevdet Bey threatened Ussher's American colleagues (241-43, 273-76). Two weeks after this first notice, an internet site was created (FORSNET Information Technologies Company opened an address 'www.ermenisorunu.gen.tr') and, according to the *Turkish Daily News*, from the first day three million users visited that site. A protest campaign was mounted against Miramax, the American distributor of the film, and its parent company Disney.<sup>6</sup> Not only did this form letter, which flooded Disney over the holidays, urge the company to surrender plans to release the film, it also included my personal address and phone number. The following month, *Le Monde* published a front page story on the mounting anger against the film in Istanbul. Internally, the Turks had begun to refer to *Ararat* as 'a second Midnight Express' and repeated the claim that the film had been financed by 'the Armenian lobby' and stated that the Turkish minister of foreign affairs had become personally involved in the issue. There was a concerted attempt to ban the film as 'hate propaganda' against the nation of Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to state that no one had seen the film at the time. I was in the final stages of post-production, and trying to ignore this disturbing state of affairs. At the beginning of May, a few weeks before the film's

5 [http://www.turkishdailynews.com/old\\_editions/01\\_09\\_02/gunduz.htm](http://www.turkishdailynews.com/old_editions/01_09_02/gunduz.htm)

6 [www.turkishdailynews.com](http://www.turkishdailynews.com)

7 *Le Monde*, Thursday, 7 February 2002, 1.



premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, I became aware that a script of *Ararat* had somehow found its way into Turkey. Proclaiming *Ararat* a 'masterpiece propaganda film,' a certain Dr Sedat Laciner, who has recently authored an entire book on my film, stated:

Atom Egoian is an 'identity convert'. He refused his Armenian identity, even did not want to speak his mother tongue until the college years. Egoian discovered his Armenian identity when he was about 20, and understood how the Turks were bad. As a well known fact converts are generally radicals, and they tend to exaggerate the facts in order to legitimize the revolutionary shift in their way of life. ... *Ararat* is a masterpiece propaganda film directed by a talented and radical-nationalist Armenian director, financed by the Armenian lobby groups and supported by the Armenian Ministry of Culture. It is a well-packed film with the cinematic tricks, but it is impossible not to see the director's hatred behind the cinema curtain.<sup>8</sup>

*Ararat* is fully financed by the Canadian company Alliance Atlantis, through an output deal with Serendipity Point Films. Serendipity Point Films is the boutique production company of my longtime supporter Robert Lantos. Robert Lantos produced the film. If he is Armenian, he hasn't told me. As far as I have been able to determine, Robert Lantos is a Hungarian Jew who emigrated to Canada without the vaguest clue that he would one day be mistaken for the Armenian Ministry of Culture. In addition, the reaction from the US distributor, Miramax, was clear. On his way to the premiere of the film in Cannes, Harvey Weinstein was stopped by a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* and asked about the increasingly hysterical response. He replied, 'They're trying to lobby in Washington. ... They're saying that the whole movie is a PR thing. It never happened. They're denying history. To me, the denial of the Armenian holocaust reminded me of the denial of our own Jewish holocaust. I feel strongly about that.'<sup>9</sup>

In the weeks leading up to the film's premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, I tried to maintain the position that the film wasn't political. In retrospect, I'm not entirely sure what I meant by this idea. I think I believed – in what must now be perceived as a resolutely naïve gesture – that I could somehow keep myself outside of the controversy I knew the film would provoke. I felt that my status as an artist would grant me the privilege of allowing me to sit back and just watch it all unfold. The historical issues raised by the film would be taken up by the historians, while the political issues would be taken up by the politicians. This was not to be the case.

8 [http://www.eraren.org/eng/articles/turkishnews\\_ararat.htm](http://www.eraren.org/eng/articles/turkishnews_ararat.htm)

9 *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 2002.

On 15 May, a week before the film's premiere at Cannes, Ray Conlogue wrote an article for the *Globe and Mail* entitled, 'Bracing for the Cinema's Judgment.' In this article, Conlogue begins by stating that my wish not to have the film politicized was 'a little like a property developer piously hoping that nobody will perceive his 100-storey skyscraper as a large building.'<sup>10</sup> After quoting Britannica Online to the effect that 'scholars agree that propaganda from both sides has greatly confounded the issue' and with the caveat that he is 'personally agnostic' about the issue, Conlogue states that he was 'sympathetic to the Turks' inability to get their point of view before the public.' In a breathtakingly irresponsible act of journalism, Conlogue then presents a number of letters he accumulated from various 'ordinary Turks' expressing their dismay at my film project. The most pathetic decision was Conlogue's choice to include the comment of a seventeen-year-old girl, Fulya, who wrote, 'Mr. Egoyan I want to ask you if this event had happened in your history and if you were accused of such a thing what would you do? Please be honest and think about this.'<sup>11</sup> Let me be honest and think about this for a moment. How could a professional journalist allow himself to quote such an incoherent and dangerous statement? I am certainly not accusing this young woman of being complicit in the Armenian Genocide of 1915. It is the sad reality of her upbringing that she doesn't have the privilege of having access to her own history. Her government has denied her the ability to have access to the facts. But if I were accused of such a thing, I would do everything in my power to understand whether the accusations were true. Unfortunately, this young woman is living in a country where she will have a great deal of difficulty in achieving this, since her government not only denies this historic reality, but has also outlawed the use of the word 'genocide' as a way of designating the historic event. After a flood of letters from indignant Armenians – including myself – Conlogue clarified his agnosticism by stating that he had no intention of denying the slaughter of Armenians, but was only agnostic in the sense that historians are still arguing whether this is a genocide 'in the legal sense of the word.'<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to see how this discourse – begun before anyone had even seen the film – set the tone for what was to follow. From the moment the film premiered at Cannes, there was one school of thought that asserted that the film should have been a cinematic monument to what had happened. Any film that presented the Armenian Genocide had the responsibility to set the record straight in black and white terms; to be, in short, what Edward Saroyan was trying to create in the film-within-the-film. According to one reviewer, the fact that I didn't dwell on this historical representation was

10 *Globe and Mail*, 15 May 2002.

11 Ibid.

12 *Globe and Mail*, 29 May 2002.



'an exercise in either pretension or timidity that exploits the tragedy.'<sup>13</sup> Curiously, this response has come almost entirely from non-Armenians, who, in the words of Jonathan Foreman of the *New York Post*, have stated that the event 'deserves a more engaged and honest treatment.'<sup>14</sup> Many of these critics felt exasperated that the devices I chose to use seemed to complicate unnecessarily the presentation of history. This was a story that needed to be told, so why not tell it in a straightforward way? I have never received such a divided response to my work. The *Washington Post* printed two reviews of the film on its release. While one critic complained that I was trying to say way too much and had 'worked too hard on this movie,' another, in the very same edition, observed that I seemed to agree with Henry James that 'historical fiction is neither.' This critic concluded that *Ararat* was successful in leading the viewer through a thorny and complicated story, 'addressing moral ambiguity without succumbing to it.'<sup>15</sup>

As you can see, unlike many of my colleagues, I do read my reviews. What has surprised me is the ease with which the ideas in the film – ideas which I consider to be timely and highly pertinent to the world we're living in now – can be dismissed by the simple claim that the film is trying to do too much. Any plot summary of *Ararat* – which any critic is bound to supply – becomes quickly bogged down by the film's various subplots and secondary characters. For my part, with some degree of distance, I still find it impossible to imagine how any of the characters or circumstances could be further tailored. Again, my work might have taken on a different shape if a more popular movie version of the Armenian Genocide had already existed, but this was not the case. My film had to tell the story of what happened, why it happened, why it's denied, how it's denied, and what happens when you continue to deny. As I said earlier, *Ararat* is a story about the transmission of trauma. It's cross-cultural and intergenerational. The grammar of the film uses every possible tense and mood available to tell its story, from the basic pillars of the past, present, and the future, to the subjective, the past-perfect, and past not-so-perfect, and the past-would-be-perfect-if-it-weren't-so-conditional. I firmly believe that this was the only way the story could be told. It is dense and complex because the issues are so dense and complex.

A few weeks before the film's premiere as the Opening Night Gala of the Toronto International Film Festival, I received an e-mail from a Turkish student who was studying film theory and political science at an American university. I'd like to take this opportunity to read some extracts from this letter:

13 Jonathan Foreman, 'Ararat a Molehill,' *New York Post*, 15 November 2002.

14 Ibid.

15 *Washington Post*, Friday, 29 November 2002. I am referring to reviews by Desson Howe (Weekend, 44), and Ann Hornaday (section C, 1).

Dear Sir,

I would like to address a certain thing that has been making me spend restless nights in the past few days, in fact weeks. I wish this letter could go directly to Mr. Egoyan himself. I have been a follower of Mr. Egoyan's work since 'Exotica', and I am a lover of the movie 'The Sweet Hereafter' ... This is neither a threat letter, nor a plea for you to abandon the movie, nor a propaganda letter defending the Turkish governments statements ... - all I want to know is your stand, your take on the whole situation.

We both know the controversy surrounding all the things that happened in the Ottoman Empire rule. I have tried to investigate the truth behind this - yet one sees nothing but propaganda, on both sides. ... It seems to me, the only way to actually approach this is in an emotional way, taking the full poetic license and making the audience realize this. ... I am against movies like 'Pearl Harbor', 'Schindler's List' or 'Saving Private Ryan.' ... They give the illusions of being real, of being documentaries even, tricking the audience, creating the illusion of having been there - I think such behaviour is disrespectful of the people who actually went through such experiences ... I believe cinema has the power to stir and make us share emotions - and I believe that it becomes a ruthless mind wash when combined with things such as the documentary style of 'Saving Private Ryan.'

He continues:

Now, let me tell you my take on the situation ... as you know, there is a lot of hatred - on both sides. But how does a filmmaker stand in this chaos? The media is in our hands, and we have crafted many of today's famed symbols and metaphors. We have such power in our hands - how do we use it? *Ararat*, and all of the events along with it are horrifying. 1.5 million dead, 1,500 or only one, it is a travesty in each option and I am sick and tired of defending the twisted ideals of a monarchy that my nation got rid of for the sake of freedom anyway. ... So how would I make the movie? I don't know. I don't know in what mindset I would be if similar things had happened to my people - I wouldn't have the right to make such a movie. I am merely voicing my concerns, my inner devils. ... I thank you for taking your time in reading this letter and being exposed to some idealistic kid.

I never responded to this e-mail. I was overwhelmed by its confusion, for I immediately recognized the source of those mixed emotions. What this 'idealistic kid' was talking about was the disparity between the horror of man's inhumanity to man, and the uneasy alchemy that occurs when one combines the elements of cinema, glamour, and atrocity. Any act of tyranny or terror involves a dehumanizing of the other. Can a scene that depicts an act of terror ever truly serve to counter this effect? If an act of genocide is only made possible by the abstraction of other human beings,



can a film *about* genocide serve to rectify this violence? Referring back to the pivotal scene where Raffi drives Ali home, he thanks the actor, who played the monster Jevdet Bey, for incarnating the evil that destroyed his race. Ali responds by dismissing the young man's compliments, saying that he was 'prepared to hate [his] character,' that he was preconditioned by his community and that any response was the result of this preconditioning. In other words, his response was to be expected and its value thus diminished. Raffi's reaction to this expresses the same sense of anguish that was contained in the e-mail I received. He says that he is suspicious of anything that is designed to provoke a reaction, of 'anything that's supposed to make [him] feel something.' But what Ali did with his performance somehow transcended those concerns. His dramatization was so compelling that it made Raffi feel 'all that anger again.' Is this a good thing? What can it lead to? Is it a progressive energy? Does it help solve anything? A year ago, I felt that issues raised in this film would address the 'idealistic kid's' questions. Yet there's something naïve about this attitude – about the belief that a film could ever tell the true story. Isn't this exactly Raffi's dilemma as he watches Edward's film shoot? What is it about this cinematic artifact that makes Raffi need to go to Turkey with the improbable goal of shooting the real Mount Ararat? What is it that drives the young man's need for authenticity?

In the course of making the first commercially distributed film dealing with the Armenian Genocide, I was faced with an odd variant of the old philosophical quandary: If a tree falls in an empty forest where no one can hear it, does it still make a sound? The genocide of a people had occurred over eighty-five years ago, but to much of the world this event had become surrounded by an empty forest of denial. Did this atrocity still make a sound? Did it need a film to make it happen, in the sense of registering this event with the rest of the world? In our media-hungry culture, would the books and the archives and the survivors' stories ever be enough? I realize that there are some who have been angered by my insistence on asking these questions in the face of something so massively cataclysmic as the genocide of a people, especially when, in this case, it is my own people. But I must stress that I am concerned not only with aesthetics focusing on the unreliability of language and representation. Rather, I am convinced that it is only through these questions that the emotional nature of my subject could be addressed. I wasn't simply interested in making a film that probes our need for making and watching films. This type of postmodernist exercise, within which my work has often been located, is becoming tiresome and so hermetically sealed within its own world of semiotics and theory that it misses the reason why most people go to see films. People go to see movies because they expect to be moved. When they go to see a film about genocide and its residual effects on generations of survivors and their children, they expect to be *really* moved.

Which brings us back to the *Titanic* story. What I had found so suspicious about the commemorative silence imposed on the international audience that night was the unholy marriage of real human suffering with real human arrogance. By winning the Oscar for Best Picture that night, James Cameron had forever cemented his identity as a filmmaker with the history of the *Titanic*. He would be responsible for the way a new generation would now remember the event. And yet, I believe that there's something about the sheer scale of this type of blockbuster filmmaking that somehow resists the way in which history is most effectively passed. In making *Ararat*, I wanted to show how the truth is not to be found in the epic scenes of deportation and massacre, but in the intimate moments shared by individuals – between strangers in a hallway, between workers on a film set, and most profoundly in the conversations between parents and their children. Any blockbuster attempt to amplify the event from the very private turmoil its memory provokes is to diminish – or at the least to misrepresent – an essential aspect of its meaning.

At the end of the film, in a dark room at a customs office, a truth is finally revealed. Raffi appeals to David, the customs officer, to accept his testimony in an act of faith beyond any proof. After the collapse of his story, he is left only with his words. This moment that is shared between the customs officer and the young man he has been interrogating has come from a deep sense of compassion, and I firmly believe that it is only from this capacity – the ability to feel someone else's experience of the world – that we can draw any hope for reconciliation. Everything else leads to torture, murder, and yes, even genocide. Compassion leads to the revelation and disclosure of truth in all its interconnectedness and devastating elaboration. And compassion certainly cannot exist if one's energies are used to conceal. In making a film that dealt with this history, I was dealing with a legacy of concealment and denial. As a result, I needed to tell this story with a forest of questions, and the sound of many possible answers. I needed to present *Ararat* with pristine complexity, showing how history is often created from the effort to accommodate differing accounts of the same event. From the stories of survivors passed on to children and grandchildren, to the industrial needs of commercial entertainment, to the private and sacred mythologies of art, the collective human linkage of experience is both the wonder and tragedy of our condition.

#### AFTERWORD

After viewing the film at the Berlin Film Festival in 2003, a Turkish film distributor, Sabahattin Cetin, bought the rights to show *Ararat* in Turkey. Following months of appeals, the new culture minister, Erkan Mumcu, finally approved the public screening of the film, providing that at least one scene depicting Ottoman soldiers raping Armenian women be censored.



While the previous Turkish culture minister İstemihan Talay had denounced *Ararat* as 'propaganda,' the new AKP Islamist party government – which had pledged to expand freedom of expression as part of its bid to join the European Economic Community – proclaimed that the film was suitable for viewing in the country. According to an Associated Press wire report sent out at the end of the year, Mumcu stated that Turkey could 'easily tolerate such things,' adding that 'strong reaction to this movie would only help keep the subject on the agenda.'

Days later, however, the scheduled 16 January premiere of *Ararat* in Istanbul and Ankara was cancelled when a far-right nationalist party used violent threats against the government, the distributor, and theatre owners. In addition, a poster campaign in the streets of Istanbul depicted the film's supporters and the governing party as enemies of Turkey. The posters showed an 'X' through the title of the film and a slogan that read 'It will never happen.' In a lengthy article in the *New York Times* on 20 January 2004, Sabahattin Cetin, the owner of Belge Film which had purchased the film, defended his decision to cancel the release by stating, 'Would you want to watch a movie in a theater that could be stoned or where there would be violence?' The article goes on to quote Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Action party, 'It would be in our interest to investigate why a film that is against the Turkish nation has been imported into Turkey.'

Less than two years after Ray Conlogue's confession of 'agnosticism' on the issue, the *Globe and Mail* published an editorial on 26 January 2004 on the blocking of *Ararat*'s distribution in Turkey, calling it 'a terrible loss for the Turkish people, as well as for Armenians who still hope the genocide will be officially recognized in Turkey.' The editorial continues by asking, 'What do the nationalists fear would happen if Turks sat down to watch Mr. Egoyan's complicated tale? ... the stirrings of empathy, the desire for reconciliation? A wish to know more, to seek the truth about the country's history?' After stressing the importance of bearing witness and speaking out against atrocities and 'unspeakable horror,' the editorial concludes that 'the Turkish people are the poorer for this violent threat against their freedom to think.'

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