Ararat and Collective Memories of the Armenian Genocide

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Atom Egoyan’s Ararat (2002) has been misread and inappropriately critiqued as a failed cinematic representation of the Armenian genocide. The author of this article argues that the film is instead an ambitious meditation on the question of how to represent genocide in general, and the Armenian genocide specifically. He traces a number of themes in Ararat, including the political stakes involved in genocide commemoration, the reasons for and costs of denial, the difficulty and urgency of constructing a past when only ruins remain, the problematic nature of cinematic treatments of genocide, the intensely personal ways in which collective memory helps to shape individual and family identities, and the complexities of determining which versions of the past are reliable. Further, the author discusses the possible consequences of the film’s clearly unintended suggestion that, ultimately, there are no solid criteria for choosing between competing versions of the past.

While Atom Egoyan’s Ararat (2002) received a good deal of praise, much of the critical establishment has seen it as a failed attempt to create a cinematic representation of the 1915–1918 Armenian genocide. Critics have seen the film as complex, thought-provoking, and even admirably ambitious, yet inadequate in its portrayal of the nature and events of the twentieth century’s first genocide. Some reviewers, along with some members of the Armenian community, consider this apparent failure a squandered opportunity because, unlike the Holocaust, which has been the focus of well over a hundred feature-length films, the Turkish attempts to eradicate the Armenian population during World War One have seldom been seen on screen.

If Ararat were in fact a film about the Armenian genocide, it would indeed have to be regarded as a spectacular failure: the only representations of genocide in it are crude, one-dimensional, melodramatic, and largely uninformative. However, in this article, I argue that Egoyan’s film must be evaluated on different terms. Indeed, it is fair to say that Ararat challenges basic conventions involved in the cinematic reconstruction of genocide. Ultimately, it is not a film about the Armenian genocide itself, but is instead a multi-layered attempt to come to terms with the ways in which traumas of the past shape collective and individual identities in the present, and with the questions of how to represent genocide in general and the Armenian genocide in particular.
If Egoyan’s critics were hoping for a straightforward account of the Armenian genocide, they may have been doubly vexed: not only does Ararat refuse to provide such an account, but it is also deeply critical of this sort of cinematic practice. Joshua Hirsch writes that a traditional “realist” historical film (of the kind that some critics appear to have wanted Egoyan to deliver)

rhetorically presents itself as a transparent window onto the past, encouraging spectators to disavow the film’s status as a cinematic construction, and to feel as if they are seeing history with their own eyes, remembering what they have never in fact experienced. The realism of this genre inherits several preexisting realisms, including photographic realism, which stresses the indexical nature of the photographic image, and historical realism, which stresses the truthfulness, objectivity, and sufficiency of the historical text.

Egoyan’s film, on the other hand, refutes the notion that the past can be depicted in a transparent manner, insisting that it is important to come to terms with the processes by which collective memories of genocide are constructed and—equally importantly—erased. The film presents neither photographs nor historical texts as objective or sufficient for conveying the truth of the past. Rather, it presents them as what Marita Sturken terms “technologies of memory,” or “objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.” Ararat focuses on the ways in which these objects are mobilized within the filmmaking process, taking great pains not to disavow cinematic artifice, but to highlight it.

The narrative in Ararat revolves around the production of a film, also titled Ararat, by the Armenian filmmaker Edward Saroyan (played by Charles Aznavour). Through the critique of this film, often as raised by characters involved in the production, Egoyan is able to pose some important questions concerning the creation and popularization of collective memories of genocide. Saroyan, who is in his seventies, is a filmmaker of international stature (he is referred to at one point as “one of the greatest directors in the world”), though he has not made a significant film in many years. He is the son of a genocide survivor, and feels an intense obligation to bring the story of the genocide to a mass audience. In an effort to recruit an art historian (Ani, played by Arsinée Khanjian and modeled on Nouritza Matossian) to act as a consultant on the film, Saroyan declares: “My mother was a genocide survivor. All my life I promised to make a film [that] would tell her story. How she suffered. And now, we are making this film.” Saroyan’s plea is almost heartbreaking in its earnestness, but hints at some of the problematic aspects of his film. The film-within-a-film depicts the genocide in the broadest possible strokes: Saroyan’s Ararat is a sprawling spectacle filled with stock images of pure evil, bold heroism, horrific violence, and unrelenting suffering, all punctuated by screams, close-ups of children’s anguished faces, and a soundtrack that never leaves any doubt as to the desired emotional response. The most powerful Turkish leader in the film, played with unbridled menace by Elias Koteas, is even introduced against a background of flickering flames—in case there was any doubt as to his demonic nature.
In interviews and in his own writings about *Ararat*, Egoyan has discussed his understanding, simultaneously critical and empathetic, of Saroyan’s film and motivations. While he sees Saroyan’s intentions as noble, he writes that noble intentions alone “do not necessarily lend themselves to critical distance, and it’s clear from the glimpses we see of Edward’s movie that it might sometimes veer into an exaggerated and extreme view of history. Like many epics, it paints its heroes and its villains in an ‘over-the-top’ way in order to heighten the sense of drama.” ⁶ Still, Egoyan does not dismiss this style of filmmaking, at least when Saroyan is the filmmaker: “Edward’s *Ararat* is a sincere attempt to show what happened, told from the point of view of a boy who was raised with these images by his mother—a genocide survivor. The scenes of the film-within-the-film represent the way many survivors and children who were told of these horrors would recall these events.” ⁷ In an interview with Jonathan Romney, Egoyan elaborated by noting that he “could not afford to make fun of that film,” and that he was sympathetic to audience members who imbued Saroyan’s film with an import other than that which Egoyan had intended: “It would be very difficult to punish people for wanting to project something into the film-within-the-film, if they need to do that.” ⁸

One of the reasons why Egoyan might feel more sympathetic toward Saroyan than toward a filmmaker such as Steven Spielberg (whose 1993 *Schindler’s List* is an example of overwrought Hollywood productions of genocide) is that both he and Saroyan faced a challenge that is not faced by filmmakers whose subject matter is the Holocaust.⁹ Because collective memories of the Holocaust are so firmly entrenched and institutionalized among much of the world’s population, directors such as Spielberg can assume that most of their audience members share a common base of knowledge. Filmmakers are thus absolved of responsibility for establishing the basic historical contours of this genocide. Audiences may not have a nuanced understanding of the Holocaust, but they can be counted upon to have at least a basic sense of who the major social actors were and how many Jews were killed.¹⁰ By contrast, both versions of *Ararat* were filmed in the context of continuing Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide—a denial powerful enough to obliterate memory and instead forge widespread collective amnesia.¹¹ Turkey’s efforts have in fact exceeded denial: at times the Turkish government has worked to prevent any discussion of the topic. To this end, it has challenged forcefully Hollywood production companies that demonstrate an interest in depicting the genocide.¹² The dearth of cinematic or popular cultural representations of the Armenian genocide meant that, unlike Spielberg, neither Egoyan nor Saroyan could assume any background knowledge on the part of their audiences; they would have to take on the burden of presenting the genocide to mass audiences for the first time.

Egoyan’s inability or unwillingness to dismiss Saroyan’s film might also stem from his dependence on the film-within-the-film to carry much of his own film’s didactic content. In the introduction to the screenplay for *Ararat*, Egoyan writes that
since “no widely-released dramatic movie had ever presented the genocide, it was important that any film project would need to show what happened. . . . It would be unimaginable to deal with this history without presenting what the event looked like.” 13 Egoyan sees this as a task for both versions of Ararat, but he focuses on the specific challenges for the makers of the film-within-the-film:

Edward Saroyan, and his screenwriter, Rouben [Eric Bogosian], are faced with an awesome task. They will be the first filmmakers to present these images to a wide public. If their film seems raw and blunt in its depictions, it’s because they are the first people to cinematically present these “unspeakable horrors.” They are desperate to get the point across.14

Of course, Egoyan produced his film within the same historical and cinematic context, and shares Saroyan and Rouben’s “awesome task.” However, he does not pursue it as doggedly as do Saroyan and Rouben; his film is far more ambitious and wide-ranging than theirs. In his exploration of the lasting effects of the genocide and denial on contemporary identities, Egoyan demonstrates a relative lack of urgency when it comes to representing the genocide itself. He relies upon Saroyan’s film to provide much of the necessary historical detail, including the “raw and blunt” depictions of massacres, forced marches, and so on, but unlike Saroyan, he turns to the genocide only periodically.

This directorial decision accounts for much of the critics’ dissatisfaction. Egoyan is clearly aware of the need for a detailed and popularized representation of the genocide, but he distances himself from Saroyan’s attempts to address these needs. It is worth asking, therefore, what accounts for the relative luxury Egoyan has (if it is a luxury) to feel that he can address more than the genocide, or to decide not to address the genocide in a feature-length format. The answer, I suspect, has to do with generational differences between Saroyan and Egoyan. As the son of a survivor, Saroyan was confronted with the immediacy of the genocide in ways that Egoyan was not. (Aznavour beautifully and heart-wrenchingly conveys this immediacy—with his deeply mournful looks; with the anger and desperation in his voice when he declares that the source of “so much pain” is “not the people we lost, or the land. It’s to know that we could be so hated”; and with the curl of his upper lip and his barely perceptible trembling as he asks, “Who were these people who could hate us so much? How can they still deny their hatred, and so hate us . . . hate us even more?”) The rawness of his mother’s pain threatens to consume Saroyan; his cinematic interests are so rooted in the past that he is unable even to consider addressing the present. Egoyan, on the other hand, is a generation further removed from the genocide, and faces a different set of concerns. More recent and contemporary Armenian struggles related to the genocide are not limited to survival and trauma, but extend to matters of denial and commemoration, and to the impact of the past upon the present.15 Egoyan’s film has inherited the legacies of these struggles, though Egoyan has not
abandoned the mission of bringing a cinematic representation of the genocide to mass audiences. The filmmaker sums up the challenges he confronted in his remark that “the screenplay had to tell the story of what happened, why it happened, why it’s denied, why it continues to happen, and what happens when you continue to deny.” Clearly, this is an ambitious agenda, and the questions that Egoyan poses here have no simple answers.

To address the issue of “what happened” and why, Egoyan relies upon Saroyan’s film in a number of ways. Aside from showing us direct footage from the film-within-the-film, which is often quite heavy in exposition, he presents scenes of actors involved in the production discussing their understandings of the film. Occasionally, the two versions of Ararat blur, and it is unclear whether we are meant to understand what we are seeing as a direct representation of the genocide, or as Saroyan’s version of the events. In any case, the bulk of what we learn about the genocide centers around one particular event: the siege of the walled city of Van. The siege was one of the opening salvos of the genocide, and occurred as Turkish forces were systematically destroying villages throughout the larger province of Van, massacring tens of thousands. The siege’s unique historical significance is not as a setting for horror, however, but as the most important example of Armenian resistance. At Van, barely a thousand Armenians, armed with only a small number of rifles, pistols, and antique weapons, fought for more than a month to protect a city of 30,000 from a full Turkish military contingent of more than ten thousand led by German officers and supplied with massive ordnance, including cannons. The Armenian forces were hopelessly overmatched, but managed to hold out until the Turkish forces, led by Jevdet Bey, learned that the Russian army was on its way and retreated.

Egoyan’s decision to focus heavily on the siege at Van enables him to resist a one-dimensional depiction of Armenians exclusively as suffering victims, and to emphasize instead their bravery and heroism. Indeed, collective memories of the siege have long played an important role in attempts to forge an alternative to Armenian identities centered on victimhood. One of the survivors of the siege has written that Armenian resistance during the first three days of the siege alone was “sufficient to eradicate the tendency to servile fear and to cowardice which six centuries of unparalleled persecution had implanted.” But as important as this kind of effort to construct an alternative identity might be, it is an enterprise fraught with potential dangers. Because Saroyan’s film is only one of the ways in which we learn about the siege, focusing on this particular moment enables Egoyan to highlight these dangers and in the process to critique Hollywood conventions.

To reconstruct the siege, both versions of Ararat rely upon the memoirs of Dr. Clarence Ussher, who was working at the American mission at Van. During the siege, Ussher opened his home to a hundred refugees, provided medical care to a population ravaged by a measles epidemic, pneumonia, and dysentery, and did his best to apply diplomatic pressure to convince Jevdet Bey to end the massacres. His
memoir, *An American Physician in Turkey*, is the most detailed account of the siege. But if the scenes to which we are privy are any indication, Saroyan’s film concentrates so heavily on Ussher’s heroism that it risks losing sight of the lives and struggles of the Armenian population of Van. At various points during the film-within-the-film, we see Ussher standing up to Jevdet Bey, providing medical care, leading the refugees in prayer, and advising them on how to seek American aid. Moreover, as far as we can tell, Ussher appears to be directly in control of the film’s narrative. The camera follows his every movement, and he and Jevdet Bey are the only characters given screen time to discuss their understandings of events at any length. Indeed, the film features Ussher’s speech so prominently and casts his words in such a heroic light, that the actor playing him seems to be filled with a sense of entitlement and, when necessary, outrage. At one point in the production process, Ani storms onto the set and disrupts the filming. The entire cast is upset, but Martin (Bruce Greenwood) remains in character as Ussher and shouts “What is this?! God damn it!” and proceeds to lecture Ani by declaring:

> We’re surrounded by Turks. We’ve run out of supplies. Most of us will die. The crowd needs a miracle. This child is bleeding to death. If I can save his life, it may give us the spirit to continue. This is his brother. His pregnant sister was raped in front of his eyes, before her stomach was slashed open to stab her unborn child. His father’s eyes were gouged out of his head and stuffed into his mouth. And his mother’s breasts were ripped off. She was left to bleed to death. Who the fuck are you?

Ani is taken aback by Martin’s outrage, and, chastened, is unable to answer his question. It is worth noting, however, that while Ani appears to regret having interrupted the filming of the scene, as a scholar who has spent her entire career investigating facets of the genocide as reflected in the work of Armenian artist Arshile Gorky, and as an Armenian woman whose life is inextricably bound up in efforts to understand, preserve, and disseminate Armenian culture, she is arguably much better positioned than is Martin to provide a compelling answer to the question “Who the fuck are you?” As Romney notes: “Martin, after all, is only an actor,” with little right to “assume Ussher’s own moral authority.”

Martin’s hubris is not the only issue here, since in Egoyan’s film, even Ussher’s moral authority is not beyond reproach. Certainly, we never see Ussher behaving less than admirably (really, there is no possibility that we would, since we see him only in scenes that Egoyan has cannibalized from Saroyan’s version of *Ararat*), but his lectures to the Armenian population of Van come across as highly paternalistic. Moreover, Saroyan’s decision to feature Ussher so prominently is brought into relief when we consider the casting decisions and narrative in Egoyan’s film. In Egoyan’s version of *Ararat*, the bulk of the dramatic tension revolves around the lives of Armenian characters—Ani, her son Raffi (David Alpay), and Saroyan. Toni Cade Bambara has written that the film-within-the-film device can be used to “call attention to the fact
that in conventional films we’re seduced by technique and fail to ask what’s being filmed and in whose interest, and by failing to remain critical, become implicated in the reconstruction/reinforcement of an hierarchical ideology.” In this case, the fact that a powerfully articulate Armenian woman seems so dramatically out of place in Saroyan’s production forces the audience to maintain a critical distance from a trope that is central to so many Hollywood films that deal with genocide or with ethnic or racial violence in general: namely, the figure of a white or European hero, usually invested with some degree of state authority, who has come to save the day. (The obvious reference here is to Oskar Schindler in *Schindler’s List*, but we might also think, for example, of the FBI agents in *Mississippi Burning* and *Thunderheart*, or the prosecuting attorney in *Ghosts of Mississippi*.)

In Egoyan’s version of *Ararat*, even Ussher’s memoir is made somewhat peripheral: the character who provides us with the most detailed accounts of the genocide is Raffi, and he does so not only by relying upon the memoir, but also by reading “The Dance” by the Armenian poet Siamanto. In fact, Egoyan’s film does include a highly sympathetic older white man invested with state power in the character of David (Christopher Plummer), a Toronto airport customs agent who holds Raffi’s fate in his hands. (Raffi has been stopped with film canisters containing cocaine. He claims, and appears to believe, that the canisters contain film, and he convinces David to open them in a darkened room so that the footage will not be exposed.) But in stark contrast to Ussher/Martin, with his heroic, pompous, or patronizing speeches, David is presented as an admirable character precisely because he is willing to listen to someone who would, under normal circumstances, be rendered doubly mute—first as a young drug courier within the Canadian criminal justice system, and second as an Armenian intent on addressing the genocide in the face of Turkish denial. While David serves to provide a reminder of the contemporary power of the state, his humility (that is, his recognition that his knowledge is limited) works to model the appropriate stance for sympathetic members of dominant groups.

While Saroyan’s reliance upon Ussher might be problematic, none of the characters in the film levels this criticism. Even Ani, who is forced to deal with Martin head on, and who was brought on board as a historical consultant, never expresses any concern about Ussher’s centrality. Ani does, however, interrogate some of Saroyan’s other choices. She is particularly interested in the looming backdrop of Mt. Ararat, which is prominently featured in many of the film’s scenes. Early in the production process, Saroyan escorts Ani on a tour of the sets, and tells her that “everything you see here is based upon what my mother told me,” but Ani is dumbfounded by the painting of Mt. Ararat, noting that the mountain would not be visible from Van. Saroyan’s response “well, yes, but I thought that it would be important” is far from reassuring, and Ani objects, “But it’s not true.” But her objection is not unequivocal. When Saroyan laughingly responds that “it’s true in spirit,” Ani joins him in making
light of the situation. Still, after Rouben joins them, the debate continues. When Rouben defends the use of the Mountain as a backdrop by invoking “poetic license,” Ani inquires, “Where do you get those?” Rouben responds, “Wherever you can.” Ani’s questioning does suggest genuine concern about the liberties that the filmmakers are taking with history (she continues the exchange by asking “So that’s my job? To let you feel better about distorting things?”), but it is not an outright condemnation. Her questions are asked with a smile, and the discussion reads as fairly light banter, especially since Ani remains on the project. Saroyan and Rouben take even more audacious historical liberties when they choose to present Gorky as having played a uniquely heroic role in the Siege at Van. When they explain to Ani the decision to make Gorky a hero, she asks not only with skepticism, but also with genuine curiosity, “How would you do that?”

Ani’s lightheartedness in the discussion might be due to a recognition that big-budget films work with different constraints than do professional historians, and that it would be unrealistic to hold Saroyan and Rouben to the same standards of historical veracity. But it might also be the case that Ani is willing to entertain the possibility that, in a larger sense, Saroyan is correct in his understanding that a “true” representation of the genocide would feature Mt. Ararat prominently. In an earlier scene, Saroyan refers to the mountain wistfully, saying, “When I was a boy, my mother used to tell me this was ours. Even though it was so far away. And I used to dream of a way to approach it. To make it belong to who I was, to who I became.” This sense of the importance of Mt. Ararat not only for Saroyan’s sense of self, but also as a symbol of Armenian national identity, is powerful enough to suggest that the poetic license to which Rouben refers might actually yield a broader truth than that which could be attained by the strict adherence to “the facts.” Still, no matter how lighthearted, the discussion highlights the artifice involved in cinematic historical reconstruction. Egoyan presents decisions about how to represent history as highly calculated and far from natural or automatic, and thus encourages audiences to maintain critical distance when evaluating any historical narratives.

There is some risk for Egoyan that encouraging this sort of critical distance can backfire, since he, like Saroyan, is trying to present a version of the past that audiences will find credible. Both filmmakers are involved in efforts to construct and disseminate collective memories of the Armenian genocide, and given the strength of Turkish denial, it cannot be taken for granted that audiences will accept the account that Egoyan provides. For Egoyan, denial is perhaps the most important issue addressed in the film. The filmmaker has remarked: “I think we have to be able to find a way to stop talking about this as a film of the Armenian genocide. It’s a film about living with the effects of the denial of that event into the present.” The phrasing here is important, as Egoyan’s emphasis within the film is on the deeply personal consequences of living with denial. In the sections of the film that follow Raffi’s relationship with his lover and stepsister, Celia (Marie-Josée Corze), and their
attempts to come to terms with their fathers’ deaths, we get a sense of just how important acknowledgement and understanding of the genocide can be to the formation of individuals’ identities.

Both Celia’s and Raffi’s fathers died under circumstances that are extremely difficult for their children to comprehend. Raffi’s father was killed while attempting to assassinate a Turkish diplomat. This plotline is based on a 1970s series of real-life assassinations of Turkish diplomats by Armenians enraged by Turkish denial. But as far as Raffi is concerned, his father’s motivations are a mystery. While he initially appears to have come to terms with his father’s actions by accepting the explanation that he was a “freedom fighter,” it soon becomes clear that Raffi does not have a clear sense of what this means (after all, the genocide ended long before the assassination attempt). He has difficulty confronting Celia’s claim that his father should instead be understood as a “terrorist.” Raffi’s efforts to understand the difference, and to come to terms with his father’s actions, eventually lead him to Turkey and therefore ultimately to his troubles at the customs inspection.

Celia’s family history is no less complicated. Her father was married to Ani, and died after falling off a cliff in Ani’s company. Celia believes that her father’s fall came just as Ani was about to leave him, and she struggles to understand whether Ani should be blamed for his death. She is enraged enough to consider the possibility that Ani murdered him, but in her calmer moments she suspects that the fall was a suicide. For her part, Ani claims that the fall was accidental, though she suggests that her memory is not completely reliable: “I can’t remember it the way you want me to. And even if I could remember what you want me to remember, I won’t. I don’t need to.” Egoyan sees Ani’s position here as deeply problematic, since “of all people, Ani is someone who should understand what the effects of denial are. . . . And yet, she’s in a very privileged position where she refuses to acknowledge another woman’s history. And that privilege takes a huge emotional toll on someone.” That toll is expressed in Celia’s increasingly erratic behavior, which culminates in her efforts to destroy one version of Gorky’s most famous painting, *The Artist and His Mother.*

The juxtaposition of Celia’s history with Raffi’s works in several ways. At one level, we are encouraged to see the impact of their fathers’ deaths as parallel, and as providing metaphorical insight into the denial of the genocide. Both deaths demonstrate the pain of erased histories, and the difficulty of forging a personal identity when the past is denied or kept secret. On the other hand, there is an important difference between the two deaths, since Raffi’s father’s death was shaped by the vastly oppressive and bureaucratic nature of Turkish power and brutality, while Celia’s father’s suffering had to do with a deeply personal relationship between two people. For her part, Ani refuses to see the deaths as having anything in common, telling Raffi “[Celia] has no right to compare the two men. Your father died for something he believed in.” But Ani’s effort to distinguish between the two deaths is not entirely convincing, for when Raffi asks what his father was fighting for, Ani is unable to
formulate an answer. Her failure to articulate the nature of Raffi’s father’s struggles leaves the parallel between the two deaths intact, as we are left with a sense that neither father’s motivations will ever be fully understood.28

This parallel presents a potentially serious problem for Egoyan’s project: in presenting Raffi’s father’s motivations as destined to remain shrouded in uncertainty, the film appears to suggest that no pasts are truly knowable, and that everything is open for debate. This suggestion is, of course, at the heart of genocide denial, and it is doggedly pursued within the film by Ali, the Turkish actor cast in Saroyan’s film as Jevdet Bey.29 Ali is thrilled to be in the film because it will be important for his career and because Saroyan is one of his favorite directors. But he is not sure what to make of the historical content of the film, and tries to engage Saroyan in a discussion about it. When Saroyan tries to cut off the conversation, saying “Well, I’m not sure it matters . . . ,” Ali cannot let it go. He claims that research that he has done shows that “the Turks had a real reason to believe that the Armenians were a threat to their security. I mean, their eastern border was threatened by Russia, and they believed that the Armenians could betray them. So this was . . . this was war. Populations get moved around all the time.” The directions in Egoyan’s shooting script note that “Edward stares at Ali, then decides not to answer,”30 but in the actual film, there is no deliberation on Saroyan’s part. Instead, he cuts Ali off mid-sentence by grabbing his arm, dismissing him by saying “and again, thank you for your work,” and walking away. Whether the change from page to screen was decided upon by Egoyan or Aznavour, the impact is significant: the filmed version of the scene makes it very clear that Saroyan never entertained the possibility of debating whether the genocide occurred.

Raffi, however, overhears the conversation and is unable to let Ali’s claims go unchallenged. He first approaches Saroyan, asking “doesn’t it bother you that he doesn’t get the history?” When he realizes that Saroyan feels no need to convince Ali, he takes matters into his own hands. After driving Ali home, Raffi confronts him in his apartment, asking whether he was serious when he said that he didn’t believe that the genocide happened. His questioning prompts Ali to expand upon his position, saying “Look, I never heard about any of this stuff when I was growing up. You know? I did some research for the part, and from what I’ve read . . . there were deportations. Lots of people died. Armenians and Turks. It was World War One.” Raffi argues that “Turkey wasn’t at war with the Armenians, I mean just like Germany wasn’t at war with the Jews. They were citizens, they were expecting to be protected. That scene you just shot was based on an eyewitness account. Your character, Jevdet Bey, the only reason they put him in Van was to carry out the complete elimination of the Armenian population in Van. There were telegrams, there were communiqués. . . .” But Ali cuts him off, interjecting that “I’m not saying that something didn’t happen.” Raffi is almost disbelieving as he whispers “something?” Ali is now the one who decides that the history isn’t worth debating, and tries to shift the discussion by saying “Look,
I was born here, and so were you. Right?” When Raffi confirms this, Ali continues “This is a new country. So, let’s just drop the fucking history and get on with it. No one’s gonna wreck your home. No one’s gonna destroy your family. So let’s go inside, uncork this [champagne], and celebrate.” Raffi refuses to accept this dismissal. Barely containing not only his rage, but also his sadness, he demands “Do you know what Adolf Hitler told his military commanders, to convince them that his plan would work? ‘Who remembers the extermination of the Armenians?’” This is enough to cause Ali to abandon any pretense at civility, as he leans into Raffi’s face and says forcefully “And nobody did.” Then, as he starts to turn and walk away, he ends the conversation by saying “And nobody does.”

As Jevdet Bey, Ali was playing a character who personified pure evil, and the scenes in which Bey orchestrates the torture of a young boy and the massacres of thousands provide abundant confirmation that Ali’s performance was powerful. But none of the scenes from Saroyan’s film come close to this one for raw emotion. The combination of anger, hatred, and dismissiveness that Ali conveys in his last few words is stunning. In eliciting this performance, then, Egoyan leaves no doubt about where he stands when it comes to denial. Ali’s refusal to acknowledge the genocide is even more upsetting than it might have been otherwise because he had been such a sympathetic character until that point. He is involved in a relationship with David’s son, Phillip (Brent Carver), and we’ve seen the two of them celebrate upon receiving word that Ali had been cast as Jevdet Bey. We’ve also seen a very warm side of Ali as he plays around with children in the museum where Phillip works as a security guard. And, perhaps most important, we’ve seen that Ali and Phillip are themselves victims of another kind of oppression that is often characterized by enforced silence. Ali and Phillip have come out to David, but being out has not come without cost, since there is a tremendous amount of tension within the family. That someone so well-positioned to understand the emotional consequences of denial is so adamant in his refusal only makes it that much more troubling.

Raffi’s reference to the Holocaust constitutes a powerful argument about what is at stake in the construction of memory, and about the dangers of genocide denial. It is crucial to remember the crimes of the past so as to prevent them from recurring, he suggests. While this claim has become a truism, Raffi’s ability to link one genocide to another by referencing Hitler’s reported celebration of collective amnesia reinvigorates the sentiment. And the devastating presentation of Ali’s hatred adds significantly to the critique of denial. Egoyan goes so far as to refute popularized notions of “objectivity,” or the sense that a responsible historian or journalist has an obligation to present “both sides.” Instead, the film is quite clear that not every side is equally legitimate, and not every side deserves a hearing. As Saroyan says, when it comes to the basic matter of genocide, “what is there to discuss?” Still, to the extent that Egoyan’s film is intended as a confrontation with the discourse of denial, it seems to require an answer to the question of how one might determine the basis for preferring
one version of history to another. It is not at all clear that an *insistence* on the importance of memory will suffice.

As noted above, one of the most important differences between the two versions of *Ararat* is that, while Egoyan’s project is more ambitious and intellectually complex than Saroyan’s, one of the costs of this complexity is that Egoyan is able to devote only a fairly limited amount of screen time to representations or even descriptions of the genocide itself. Some of the best known atrocities are re-enacted in Saroyan’s film, and there is an important series of assurances about the historical validity of these images. (Raffi’s reference to “telegrams and communiqués” hints at the fact that there are many different kinds of documentation of the genocide, and Egoyan’s film concludes with end titles that note: “The historical events in this film have been substantiated by Holocaust scholars, national archives, and eyewitness accounts, including that of Clarence Ussher.”) And, while discussing the genocide with David, Raffi informs him that “over a million people were killed. An ancient civilization living on ancestral lands. It was systematic and fully planned. The entire Armenian population of Eastern Turkey was eliminated.” But we are never given clear explanations of the motivations for or mechanisms of the genocide. And, while the decision to address the siege at Van represented an important challenge to the definition of the Armenian population solely in terms of victimization and suffering, one potential difficulty of emphasizing armed resistance so heavily is that audience members who are not already aware of the genocide might see the entire conflict through the lens of civil war. There is little sense of scale, of the disparity of the two sides’ resources, or of the extent of the massacres outside the walled city. And, of course, the notion that the Armenians represented a significant threat to the Turks is a core element of the rhetoric of denial, and precisely the argument put forward by Ali.

Perhaps more important, so much is done throughout the film to encourage skepticism about Saroyan’s filmmaking that there is no reason to suspect that audience members will take even his representations of the atrocities at face value. Some of the most heartfelt exchanges in the film occur between Raffi and David (David is so moved by Raffi’s story that he is willing to let him leave the airport freely, despite the fact that he was caught smuggling a substantial amount of cocaine). But toward the end of their conversation, “even as sympathetic a listener as David” declares that “There’s no way of confirming that a single word of what you’ve told me tonight is true.” 34 David is ostensibly referring to Raffi’s explanation for the contraband that is in his possession, but Egoyan clearly intends that this declaration reflect David’s understanding of the genocide as well. In some ways, this statement is more powerful coming from David than it would be coming from Ali, since David clearly wants to believe Raffi. Indeed, it is a measure of his compassion that he does not require the confirmation that he mentions. But it might be a mistake to assume this level of compassion and sympathy on the part of larger audiences.35
Aside from the scattered references to historical documentation mentioned above, the film contains little that would counter the claim that the genocide cannot be confirmed. In fact, David’s comments echo Raffi’s narration of a videotape he made during his travels to Turkey. As his videotape shows images of Armenian ruins, we hear Raffi saying “When I see these places, I realize how much we’ve lost. Not just the land and the lives, but the loss of any way to remember it. There is nothing here to prove that anything ever happened.” The tagline used in the promotional material for Ararat, “In a world full of denial, how do you determine who’s telling the truth?” misrepresents the film in troubling ways, since the film never suggests that the position of the genocide deniers has any merit or that their argument needs to be weighed. In fact, Ali’s denial causes both Raffi and Saroyan a tremendous amount of pain. There is, then, no implication that denial is a legitimate intellectual position. But for anyone who has been influenced by the power of Turkish denial, and for anyone who takes seriously Egoyan’s views on the constructed nature of historical narratives, there is little here that would be useful for assessing the validity of various versions of the past. In other words, the film offers little advice to those wishing to counter the claims of the deniers.

But, while Ararat might not confront denial as directly as some would like, Raffi’s lament for the “loss of any way to remember” the genocide is not the final word on the subject. Certainly, despite its flaws, Saroyan’s film must itself be understood as an effort to remedy this loss. Moreover, Ararat is quite clear about the fact that Saroyan’s film represents only one link in a much larger chain of memories. The prominence of Ussher’s memoir throughout the film and Raffi’s reliance on Siamanto’s poem in his conversation with David demonstrate that Saroyan’s film is just one method of commemorating the genocide. Because of the immense cultural power of big-budget films, Saroyan’s work clearly carries disproportionate weight in determining the content of collective memories of the genocide. But, regardless of the importance of film as an ideological medium, Ararat suggests that the most significant cultural product to touch on the genocide might be Gorky’s portrait The Artist and His Mother. In many ways, Ararat revolves around this painting.

Saroyan first approaches Ani to ask her to be a consultant on his film after he hears her lecture on this portrait. During the lecture, she notes that Gorky had been living in Van during the siege. In order to present Gorky as a hero of the siege, Saroyan decides to highlight Gorky’s relationship with his mother, and, to this end, he includes a scene of the two posing for the photograph that would ultimately provide the basis for the painting. Egoyan’s film opens with a scene in Gorky’s studio, as Gorky (Simon Abkarian) is working on the portrait, and repeatedly refers back to this setting. And, most important, the painting is at the center of the dramatic moment when Ani disrupts Saroyan’s production process: Celia’s attempt to destroy the painting spurred Ani to reconsider her involvement with the film, and left her so distraught that she stormed onto the set to confront Saroyan. While Ani had been content earlier
to grant Saroyan the “poetic license” to which Rouben had referred, Celia’s actions force her to reevaluate the stakes of historical reconstruction. She explains her anger to Rouben by saying that this was not merely an act of artistic vandalism, since Gorky’s portrait was not just any painting. Instead, the portrait is “a repository of our history . . . a sacred code that explains who we are and how and why we got here.”

This interpretation of Gorky’s painting represents an important argument about the links between artistic production, collective memory, and collective identities. During her lecture, Ani explains that “Gorky’s homage to his mother was bound to take on a sacred quality. His experience as a survivor of the Armenian genocide is at the root of its spiritual power. With this painting, Gorky had saved his mother from oblivion, snatching her out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal of life.” In this reading, the presence of Gorky’s mother takes on a larger metaphorical significance, so that the painting represents Gorky’s refusal to allow not only his mother, but also the entirety of Armenian culture, to be consigned to oblivion. But, of course, there is a sense in which Gorky’s efforts were doomed from the start. After all, his mother was killed, along with approximately 1.5 million Armenians, and despite the millions of pieces of evidence documenting the genocide itself, there is no information about so many of the individual lives that were lost. So, as important as Gorky’s art is, there is a very real sense in which oblivion could not be resisted. The film suggests that Gorky himself was all too aware of the limits of his ability to prevent his mother, and the genocide, from fading into oblivion. He appears at times to be anguished when contemplating his portrait, and when we are informed that he spent ten years working on it, the implication is that he could never reach any sense of resolution about the subject matter.

Teshome Gabriel writes that “what has been erased, made invisible, ruined, is also history.” This claim refers to the limits of the power of collective amnesia, and suggests that even parts of the past that have been denied still survive as ruin. Gorky’s portrait can be understood as an effort to delve into the ruins of Armenian history and to reinvigorate the memories of those who, in Audre Lorde’s famous phrase, were never meant to survive. Gabriel argues that “to live amidst the invisible ruins of cultural memory does not mean that we ourselves are ruined or lost. Rather it is these ruins which preserve, indeed constitute, our identities.” To the extent that The Artist and His Mother represents an effort to grab hold of a fragment of the past, Gorky can be seen as actively working to forge a new Armenian identity out of the ruins that remained in the wake of the genocide. A traditional portrait of a mother and child could not have captured the enormity of the erasure that the genocide represents. Because a ruin is itself history, “any attempt to restore it or preserve it is paradoxically an attempt to erase history.” A portrait representing Gorky’s mother whole would not have rung true; it could not have carried an acknowledgement of the horrors responsible for her erasure. And, in fact, the portrait does not present Gorky’s mother whole. Instead, where there should be hands, there are only
blurred outlines. While reading at a book-signing event, Ani notes that “In his most famous painting, Gorky leaves his mother’s hands unfinished, as if the history of its composition, like that of his people, had been violently interrupted. The earthly sensuality of the mother’s touch is no more. Only a pure, burning spiritual light remains.” Celia challenges this interpretation, asking: “Don’t you think he finished his mother’s hands, and after decided to erase them? That he needed to destroy what he made?” The film suggests that, in a literal sense, Celia’s interpretation is closer to the truth, since one of the scenes in Gorky’s studio shows the artist approaching the completed portrait, and nearly breaking down as he paints over—rubs out, really—the already completed hands of his mother. He is not destroying his own creation here, but is instead forcing attention to the larger erasure of the genocide, and the fact that his mother has already been destroyed. Ani’s reference to a violent “interruption” seems right here, as it is by virtue of this acknowledgement that the piece achieves its status as a locus of Armenian identity and collective memory.40

Gorky’s portrait takes on additional significance toward the end of the film. In one of her lectures, Ani notes that “Arshile Gorky was born in a small village on the shores of Lake Van. From the shores of this village, the island of Aghtamar was in plain view. Gorky, as a child, would go to this island with his mother, who would show him the detailed carvings on the walls of the church.” While The Artist and His Mother had long been understood as having been based on the photograph that Gorky’s mother commissioned of herself and her son in Van, Ani argues that this is only part of the story, since Gorky was also inspired by these ancient carvings. Gorky’s portrait is thus in itself a deeply layered acknowledgement of the complexities of history, memory, and Armenian culture. But this chain of representations does not end with Gorky, as Raffi uses his mother’s lecture to guide his voyage. Raffi’s video footage of his voyage to Turkey, which can be understood as “a low-budget counterfilm to Saroyan’s epic,” 41 incorporates images of the church carvings, and, like Gorky’s portrait, also represents an attempt to come to terms with the past by reckoning with ruins—this time quite literally.

While Raffi might sound pessimistic in his voice-over narration about the ability to remember, by the time his travels are over he has started to think about things differently. He had gone to Turkey in search of a solution to the riddle of his father’s motivations for attempting to assassinate the Turkish official. Raffi knew that his father had been consumed by his understanding of the genocide, and he hoped that the ancestral lands of the Armenian people would provide a clue to the nature of this understanding. Raffi’s hope was that, somehow, those lands would illuminate the contours of Armenian identity and enable him to tap into the collective memories that determined his father’s fate. Toward the end of the film he shows Celia his footage of the carvings, saying: “This is the origin. From the memory of this place . . . from the photograph, to the sketch, to the painting. You told me to go there . . . to put something in my heart. If that was going to happen, it was going to happen here.
I was prepared to throw my whole life away. And last night, we were sitting in that dark room. As I heard him open that can, I felt it . . . his ghost. The ghost of my father.” Thus, by the end of the film, Raffi has come to terms with the meaning of his father’s life. His death is no less tragic, but Raffi is now able to incorporate his father’s struggles into his own sense of self in new ways.

Teshome Gabriel argues that the “ruins of cultural memory . . . preserve, indeed constitute, our identities,” and he suggests that to “live among ruins . . . is to exhibit a particular kind of identity, a particular kind of subjectivity—to recognize that we are various forms of subjectivities—that we never reach the ‘end’ of the subject, the end of our path: we are more like nomads.” 42 Raffi’s journey might not be over, but, like both Gorky and Saroyan, he has worked to snatch a parent from the grasp of oblivion, and the process has helped him to forge a more meaningful sense of identity constructed out of the ruins of the past. Raffi’s angst and anguish throughout the film stand as testimony to the enduring trauma inflicted upon contemporary Armenian identities in the face of Turkish denial. But his ability to find meaning in his father’s death suggests that some degree of healing is possible for those who are able to come to terms with the ghosts of the past and, in Gabriel’s phrase, to “live among ruins.”

Notes
1. This article has benefited greatly from the insight and assistance of many people. The outside reviewers from Holocaust and Genocide Studies helped me to think about cinematic representations of genocide more deeply. Christie Photinos and Claire Rosenson provided valuable editorial assistance. My understanding of the complexities and power of Turkish denial has been greatly enhanced through comments offered by Anny Bakalian, Evren Balta, Peter Bratsis, Sinan Cinar, Nubar Hovsepian, Kostas Loukeris, Kevin Ozgercin, and M. Hratch Zadoian, though any shortcomings in this discussion are my own. Thanks, too, to my father, Lenny Markovitz, for putting me in touch with this wonderful group of scholars, and for his own comments about Turkish denial. Thanks to both my father and my mother, Ruth Markovitz, for helping me to think through not just denial, but also the other issues that I address here.

2. The claim that the Armenian Genocide was the first of the twentieth century is open to debate. Some historians have referred to the 1904–1907 German massacre of 45,000 to 65,000 members of the Herero tribe in what is now Namibia a genocide. See for example the transcript of the Deutsche Welle broadcast of 11 Jan. 2004, “Remembering the Herero,” which can be accessed at http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,1564,1084266,00.html.


4. Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 9. Sturken’s work is part of a growing body of literature addressing the construction of collective memories of traumatic events. For important discussions of these themes as they relate to genocide (most prominently, the Holocaust), see Barbie Zelizer, Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Neutralizing


5. Ararat thus fits into an important tradition of cinematic attempts to refute “realist” historical traditions in representations of atrocity and genocide. Most notable here are the films of Alain Resnais—especially his 1995 film on the Holocaust, Night and Fog. As Hirsch notes, Resnais’ films “rhetorically present themselves not as transparent windows onto history, but as translucent constructions, both succeeding and failing to represent the past (“István Szabó,” 5).


7. Ibid.


9. One important critique of Schindler’s List comes from Hungarian Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, who writes “I know that many will not agree with me when I apply the term ‘kitsch’ to Spielberg’s Schindler’s List. It is said that Spielberg has in fact done a great service, considering that his film lured millions into movie theaters, including many who otherwise would never have been interested in the subject of the Holocaust. That might be true. But why should I, as a Holocaust survivor and as one in possession of a broader experience of terror, be pleased when more and more people see these experiences reproduced on the big screen—and falsified at that?” Quoted in Tim Cole, “The Holocaust Industry?: Reflections on a History of the Critique of Holocaust Representation,” in Konrad Kwiet and Jürgen Matthäus, Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 46. Kertész’s reference to his “broader experience of terror” touches on a central problem facing anyone who would attempt to represent genocide cinematically: every filmic representation of genocide will inevitably be reductionist. A concern of many critics of films such as Schindler’s List is that audience members might emerge from screenings with a sense that they’ve come to terms with the meaning and nature of the Holocaust, when what they’ve seen can be only a partial representation. Egoyan (following filmmakers such as Resnais) makes this impossible for his audiences. Ararat does not imply that it is possible to understand the Armenian genocide by watching images of it on screen; instead, the film suggests that the best that can be hoped for is to gain an understanding of how difficult it is to come to terms with this traumatic history.

10. Romney notes that “not only is the Holocaust widely taught, but the period is so amply represented in cinema that the context of the Holocaust genre . . . itself helps makes such narratives comprehensible. . . . Schindler’s List, or indeed Roman Polanski’s The Pianist . . . can afford to be sparing with factual information” (Atom Egoyan, 175). Collective memories of the Armenian genocide are considerably more fragile. Unlike the Holocaust, they lack a powerful state embodiment. (The modern state of Armenia has nothing approaching the economic, military, or cultural power of Israel. Moreover, while Holocaust deniers have gained a disturbing amount of power in recent years, there is no parallel to the campaign of denial of the Armenian genocide as waged by the Turkish government—a campaign that is discussed in some detail below.) On denial of the Holocaust, see Deborah Lipstadt, Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory (New York: Free Press, 1993).

11. I am using the term “collective amnesia” quite literally—in the sense that collective memories of the genocide have been lost. In The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), Peter Balakian has argued persuasively
that the Armenian genocide was the target of the first international human rights campaign in
the United States, and that at least some basic knowledge of the genocide was widespread in
American society in the period immediately following World War I. Turkish efforts at denial
have had a tremendous impact on popular culture and the mass media, and have ensured that
the topic has largely disappeared from the public sphere.

12. The most stunning Turkish assault on American popular culture occurred in 1934 as
MGM was preparing to produce a film based on Franz Werfel’s historical novel, The Forty
Days of Musa Dagh, which was about the defense of an Armenian town against Turkish invaders in 1915. The Turkish ambassador to the United States applied enough diplomatic pressure to convince the U.S. State Department to intervene with MGM, and the film company agreed to drop the project (Balakian, Burning Tigris, 376–77). More recently, Ararat itself was targeted by Turkish groups who accused the film’s U.S. distributor, Miramax, and Disney, its parent company, of “anti-Turkish propaganda.” Romney notes that “the only widely seen feature film to include images of Armenian-Turkish conflict during the period remains Elia Kazan’s America America (1963)” (Atom Egoyan, 173).


14. Ibid.

15. Politicians in many countries have pressured Turkey to acknowledge the genocide. To
mark the 90th anniversary of the genocide in 2005, more than one hundred members of the
United States House of Representatives called upon the Bush administration to support a con-
gressional resolution acknowledging the genocide (http://www.armeniangenocide.com/forum/
showthread.php?t=277). Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI), addressed not only the Bush adminis-
tration, but also the Turkish government, saying that it “must stop its shameful policy of denial
Ministers in France and Switzerland have also called recently for Turkish recognition of the
genocide. A number of marches have commemorated the genocide, including “The March for
Humanity” from Fresno to Sacramento in California, which received national press coverage
in the United States. There are dozens of memorials of the Armenian genocide around the world.


20. Matossian, Black Angel, 63–76.

21. Romney, Atom Egoyan, 176. Romney also notes that, earlier in the film, Martin “smugly
assures Rouben there is nothing more he can learn about the genocide, having already
researched it.”

22. Toni Cade Bambara, “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust
and the Black Independent Cinema Movement,” in Black American Cinema, ed. Manthia
Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 133. Bambara is writing about the Black British Collective’s
Sankofa, but the claim is relevant for a discussion of this device in a variety of films.
23. “The Dance” depicts the massacres in and destruction of the town of Adana in 1909, years before the siege at Van, but the imagery has become emblematic of Turkish brutality and Armenian suffering more broadly. Balakian writes that Siamanto (Adom Yarjianian), who based his book of poetry about the massacres on eyewitness accounts from an Armenian physician named Dirn Balakian, “creates images of what Ambassador Henry Morgenthau would later call the ‘sadistic orgies’ of Turkish massacre that include rape, torture, and even crucifixion. In ‘The Dance’ Armenian women are burned to death while they are forced to circle-dance: ‘The charred bodies rolled and tumbled to their deaths’ (Burning Tigris, 155–56). Siamanto was arrested and murdered in 1915.

24. Quoted in Romney, Atom Egoyan, 173.

25. Balakian sums up this history by noting that in “1973 an Armenian survivor, Gourgen Yanikian, assassinated two Turkish consular diplomats in Santa Barbara, California. Over the next several years there were several dozen such killings.” He goes on to argue that these “mis-guided efforts to vent rage and bring the unpunished crime of the Armenian Genocide to world attention only widened the chasm between Turks and Armenians and underscored the trauma that can stem from perpetrator denial” (Burning Tigris, 380).


27. There are two versions of this painting. One is in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the other is in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The painting that we see in the film appears to be the version on display in the National Gallery. See Herrera for a discussion of the different versions.

28. Raffi’s inability to grasp his father’s motivations at this point in the film can be traced to a corresponding inability on the part of the scholarly community, and the general public, fully to understand the impact of the Armenian genocide on later generations. His experiences can be seen as those of “postmemory,” a term that Marianne Hirsch defines as characterizing “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.” Quoted in Ronit Lentin, “Postmemory, Unsayability and the Return of the Auschwitz Code” in Re-presenting the Shoah for the 21st Century, ed. Ronit Lentin (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 8. Raffi is, however, unwilling to accept that the previous generations’ experiences cannot be understood.

29. A common tactic of genocide deniers is to accept that there were large numbers of people killed, but to dispute the extent of and motivations for the killings, arguing that these things are ultimately “unknowable.” Writing about what he refers to as Holocaust “negation,” Danny Ben-Moshe notes that “The Holocaust is negated in many ways, including relativism, in which the suffering of Jews is acknowledged, but compared in relation to other events during World War II and subsequent genocides. While relativism does not deny the death of Jews, it does deny the specifically anti-Jewish character of the Nazi regime, its killing of Jews, and the uniqueness of the Holocaust.” Danny Ben-Moshe, “The State of Holocaust Negation” in Kwiet and Matthäus, Contemporary Responses, 139. Similar tactics have characterized denial of the Armenian genocide.

31. While Ali’s denial is presented as clearly damaging, the film is not at all quick to condemn Ali himself. Saroyan initially explains his unwillingness to confront Ali’s denial by saying “I can understand. He will receive anger from his people.” And Egoyan’s director’s commentary on the DVD asks “How do you deal with . . . Turks who are living in this culture who haven’t even heard [about the genocide] themselves? Can they be accused of denial of something they don’t even know about? These are complex issues.” Egoyan makes a similar point in his introduction to the screenplay, writing that “Ali’s presence asks the viewer to consider whether we can judge people today for actions taken long ago by people who are no longer present” (Egoyan, Ararat: The Shooting Script, xi).

The decision to personify denial in the figure of Ali allows Egoyan to represent this as a very human and understandable issue. But it also obscures the strength of denial. The film provides little indication that Ali’s denial is anything but an aberration, and there is certainly no indication of the highly orchestrated efforts to deny the genocide waged by the Turkish government. There is, consequently, also no real sense in the film of the consequences of denial. Possible explanations for Turkish reluctance to acknowledge the genocide include the fear that such an acknowledgement would make Turkey vulnerable to Armenian demands for reparations and access to ancestral lands; concerns about the viability of a Turkish national identity that has been based for decades upon genocide denial, and upon an understanding of Armenians as brutal traitors; concerns for state legitimacy, which has never been secure; concern that an acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide would suggest a willingness to entertain discussions of other forms of Turkish oppression, particularly oppression of the Kurds, and that any gains made by the Armenians would provide legal precedents for other oppressed groups; and, finally, fears that an image of Turkish brutality would pose an obstacle for Turkey’s efforts to enter the European Union. (In fact the failure to acknowledge the genocide has been an important sticking point in negotiations over Turkey’s entry into the European Union). For a more in-depth discussion of Turkish denial, see Balakian, Burning Tigris.

32. The authenticity of Hitler’s oft-quoted reference to the extermination of the Armenians has been challenged on the grounds that the statement appears in a document of questionable origin.

33. Egoyan is not entirely approving of Saroyan’s dismissal of Ali, however. He asks “What is moral authority—the fact that you could silence someone else because you have experienced this? I find that very problematic.” Quoted in Whyte, “Facing the Pain.”

34. Romney, Atom Egoyan, 184.

35. One example of an apparently less sympathetic audience member is Roger Ebert, who in a generally negative review has said that “Ararat clearly comes from Mr. Egoyan’s heart, and it conveys a message he urgently wants to be heard: that the world should acknowledge and be shamed that a great crime was committed against his people. . . . The message I receive from the movie, however, is a different one: that it is difficult to know the truth of historical events, and that all reports depend on the point of view of the witness and the state of mind of those who listen to the witness.” See Ebert’s review of Ararat dated 22 Nov. 2002 (http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20021122/REVIEWS/211220301/1023).


39. Ibid.

40. Egoyan writes that the “moment where Gorky rubs his mother’s hands from the canvas is the closest we come to understanding the spiritual desecration of genocide, as well as the power of art to help heal such pain.” Egoyan, *Ararat: The Shooting Script*, xi. The DVD of *Ararat* includes a deleted scene in which Ani, Saroyan, and Rouben are discussing Celia’s attack on *The Artist and His Mother*. Ani asks “What about the painting?” and Saroyan responds “It will be repaired.” Rouben adds “Like nothing ever happened.” Ani turns to face him, and says with pain and conviction “Except it did.” Like Gorky, Ani is dismayed about the possibility of repairing ruins. To erase evidence of the destruction is to go against the entire purpose of the film-within-the-film, but also of all of Ani’s work, and of the painting itself. The repair would result in another kind of denial; a picture prettier than it should be. The destruction itself is heartbreaking, but to gloss it over would be to do symbolic violence to the integrity of the past.
