

# A terrible story badly told

Ararat, written and directed by Atom Egoyan

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*Ararat*, the overwrought new film from Canadian-Armenian director Atom Egoyan, attempts to revisit the 1915 mass murder of the Armenians in Turkey by way of the life of painter Arshile Gorky (1904-48) and the present-day traumas of Torontonians of Armenian descent.

A great deal goes on in the film. The central character is Raffi (David Alpay), whose mother Ani (Arsinée Khanjian), a historian, has recently completed a book about the painter Gorky, one of the most famous survivors of the Armenian holocaust. Raffi's father (and Ani's first husband) was an Armenian activist who was slain trying to assassinate a Turkish diplomat. Raffi's stepsister and lover, Celia, (Marie-Josée Croze) believes that Ani is responsible for the suicide of her father (Ani's second husband), because of their failed marriage.

In another leitmotif, customs officer David (Christopher Plummer) is having difficulty accepting his son Philip's homosexual relationship with Ali, a struggling Canadian-Turkish actor.

There is more. An Armenian film director, Edward Saroyan, (Charles Aznavour) has come to Toronto to make a film about the Armenian tragedy, focusing on the 1915 siege of the city of Van in eastern Turkey. Ani's expertise on Armenian history and Gorky is employed for the project. It is based on the memoirs of real-life US missionary Clarence Ussher, interspersed with fragments of Gorky's travails. Ali, the half-Turkish actor, is hired to play a brutish officer in the Ottoman military. The film-within-the-film may or may not be an accurate depiction of the 1915 events.

A considerable portion of *Ararat* takes place at the Toronto airport, Egoyan's symbol apparently for both modern alienation and multicultural interconnectedness. Raffi, who worked on Saroyan's "over the top" historical film, which depicts Turkish wickedness and Armenian heroism, is returning from a trip to Mount Ararat in Turkey, a landmark in the former Armenian territory. His interaction with the horrific content of the film-within-the-film goads him into a discovery of his roots and an attempt to decipher his father's nationalist politics.

In one of the film's most implausible sequences, Raffi, delivering an abbreviated rendition of Armenian history, so transforms customs officer David (in an airport interrogation room) that he is allowed to freely enter the country despite the official's confiscation of film cans containing heroin! (It is never clear for whom or to whom Raffi is perhaps unwittingly making the delivery of drugs, or how he or David will account to their respective handlers for the multimillion-dollar confiscation.) Raffi's experience allows him and Ani to finally conjoin emotionally on the same ethnic plane. Raffi is then off to visit girlfriend/step-sister Celia, in prison for trying to desecrate a Gorky painting as an act of revenge against Gorky-expert Ani.

There is, unhappily, an element of the ridiculous in all these cluttered goings-on. *Ararat* is a very poor film in which little is coherently presented about the Armenian-Turkish situation, the painter Gorky or contemporary Canadian life.

*Ararat* was made, according to Egoyan, to counter those who have

deliberately obscured the history of the genocide and those who have denied or continue to deny that mass murder took place. In the film, Adolf Hitler is quoted discussing his plans for exterminating the Jews with his generals in 1939: "Who remembers the extermination of the Armenians?" Many governments have never formally recognized the Armenian tragedy. Two years ago, United States Congress dropped a resolution backing the Armenian case after the White House claimed it would harm US interests in the Middle East. Therefore to make a film about the events of 1915 is a very worthy and legitimate enterprise.

Unfortunately, Egoyan, in attempting to counter the deniers by chronicling this history, is largely defeated by his fashionable hostility to "grand narratives" and to the objective treatment of historical events. He articulated this hostility in an interview with *PopMatters*, remarking that he believes that "small gestures" are more telling than "broad clinical gestures." He claims, "Ultimately it's about moments between individuals, negotiations not between countries but between mothers and sons, strangers in a hallway, stepdaughters and mothers."

Egoyan is caught between two positions that are mutually exclusive: on the one hand, as someone initiated into the sacred rites of postmodernism, he essentially denies that objective interpretation of events or phenomena is possible. "The film is very much about interpretation," he told *Filmmaker* magazine. "People have the right to interpret an object. They have the license to interpret something as they wish.... Nothing is fixed."

On the other hand, the filmmaker insists on the reality "of the horrors that befell the Armenian population of Turkey in the years around 1915." Well, which is it? If indeed "nothing" is fixed, then that includes the facts about the Armenian massacre. The Turkish government's interpretation, in that case, is just as valid as the Armenian victims'. *Ararat* is ultimately weak, artistically, dramatically and intellectually, because it is attempting to reconcile irreconcilable views. It is impossible to convey powerfully the truth about historical events when one has doubts even about the validity of such a process.

In another interview Egoyan agrees that he created the relationship between Ali and Philip to connect Ali's denial of the Armenian massacre by the Turkish army with Philip's estrangement from his disapproving father. In his view, these are apparently two equally weighted acts of self-delusion. This is typical of a certain layer of shallow and irresponsible intellectuals: the denial of a massacre of one million people is equated with the denial of an individual's personal history.

In *Ararat*, Egoyan creates a baffling number of "artifacts"—cultural and personal reference points—considered by the filmmaker to be necessary plot devices for the depiction of history: Mount Ararat, Gorky's painting of his mother with its unfinished hands, the two fathers—one a suicide, the other a terrorist—the film within a film, the cans of film with heroin, the transformation of Raffi and David, Celia's hostility to Ani via Gorky, and so forth. Keeping track of the various strands of the story is a near impossibility.

This baffling mass of "small manifestations," through which big

historical questions are supposedly “transmitted” to the viewer, are not only confusing, but add up to very little. It is a false complexity, created to give the impression of depth, not something rooted in or emerging organically from life, either past or present. Egoyan’s artificial constructs do not illuminate reality, but are meant rather to distract attention from his inability to work through in a profound manner either problems of modern life or the history of the Armenian people.

Most unconvincing and contrived are the series of unlikely and unconvincing encounters: David and Raffi, David and his son, Raffi and his mother, Ani and Celia, Raffi and Ali. There is a great deal of huffing and puffing, of running around, of fake urgency.

And what about the history? The scenes of atrocities in the film-within-the-film are simply images of evil Turks and heroic Armenians. That Egoyan is not necessarily endorsing this view of the events will be lost on most viewers.

The history in its own right is far more compelling than the framework Egoyan has concocted to transmit his history-veneered artifacts, as he puts it, in a “cross-cultural” and “inter-generational” manner.

The Armenian massacres are only intelligible in the context of the rise of Turkish nationalism and the outbreak of the imperialist slaughter of World War I, since the Ottoman Empire, while maintaining subordination of Christian nationalities to the ruling Muslims, had been fairly tolerant in day-to-day practice. It was only under the last Sultan that the Ottomans began to incite atrocities on an ethnic/religious basis. There were major atrocities against the Armenians in the 1890s and again in 1909, the last after the Young Turks seized power in 1908.

The military circumstances of 1915 were critical, since Turkey was effectively surrounded, attacked by the Russians in the Caucasus, by the British in Mesopotamia, and by the British, French and Australians at Gallipoli, near the capital city of Istanbul. The Armenians were viewed as likely collaborators with the invading Russians, since they were both Christians, and the Tsar postured as the liberator of the oppressed Christians of both the Balkans and the Caucasus (Georgia and Armenia). The British cabinet endorsed a secret treaty with Russia in March 1915, promising to dismember Turkey, giving the Tsar control over both Constantinople and Armenia.

In April 1915, the Ottoman government embarked upon the decimation of the Armenian population. Armed roundups began in April 1915. An estimated 600,000 were killed outright, and another 500,000 deported in forced marches from the Armenian heartland to Mesopotamia (northern Iraq). Of these, 400,000 died, bringing the death toll to over one million. The US ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, reported to Washington: “When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race.”

A formal statement condemning the massacres was issued by Britain, France and Russia on May 24, 1915. In July, Germany and Austria, allied with Turkey, formally protested as well (the most detailed and outraged reports of the Armenian genocide came from German army officers stationed in Turkey as military advisers and attaches). The slaughter continued until September 1915.

The persecutions continued with varying intensity until 1923. By that time virtually the entire Armenian population of Anatolian Turkey had disappeared.

Another of Egoyan’s artifacts is the skewed portrayal of painter Arshile Gorky. “Of all of these objects [Ani’s book, Saroyan’s film, Raffi’s digital diary] that are transmitting the story of genocide or transmitting some notion of trauma, the one that emerges as an acknowledged masterpiece is Gorky’s painting,” said Egoyan in the *PopMatters* interview. In the presentation of the artist, as well as in segments of the Saroyan period piece, *Ararat*’s nationalist sentiments reveal themselves.

Egoyan describes Gorky as “the most famous survivor of the massacre at Van, the only person who created a masterpiece from the ashes of his

experience. But he felt he had to become a Zelig character, redefine himself to accommodate this new reality.” The film presents Gorky’s *The Artist and His Mother* (c. 1926-36) as his masterpiece, “his most original work.” The motif was provided by a photograph of himself and his mother taken in 1912, when Gorky was eight years old, to send to his father in the United States, who had moved to America to find work. In 1915 Gorky’s family was forced to embark on a death march and his beloved mother died in his arms of starvation in 1919 when Arshile was 14 years old.

The film does reference these excruciating events, but in a manner which is vulgarized, simplified and made to fit into Egoyan’s nationalist schema. In fact, Gorky is not primarily known for this beautiful and poignant work. Rather than a depicter of heritage, Gorky is considered one of the founders of “Abstract Surrealism,” and was tagged by André Breton as one of the most important painters in American history. Having survived the Armenian massacre, he went on to incorporate other international influences into his style, from the geometry of Ucello to the fluidity and open form of Kandinsky and Matta.

Gorky’s real name was Vosdanik Adoian. He renamed himself in exile and claimed to be the cousin of Russian writer Maxim Gorky, one of the then-current heroes of the left, indicating something about Gorky’s probable political sympathies. He must have understood on some level that the rise of the Soviet Union was a progressive answer to the Armenian genocide and the first imperialist war. In the US in the 1940s Gorky traveled in the same circles as Breton, Max Ernst and other exiled surrealists, all of them anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist at that time. To make him a standard-bearer for Armenian national sentiment, and to make his suicide a more or less direct result of the Armenian massacre three decades before (ignoring the traumas of fascism and Stalinism), is one of the acts of “interpretation” that Egoyan suggests are available to everyone.

In the end, unfortunately, this is what the film falls back on: ties of blood and nationality, “the transmission of trauma,” not understood rationally, but “in the heart.” This is not perhaps what Egoyan intends, but his subjective and superficial approach to history and life leaves him vulnerable to the most backward conceptions.



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