

Critics' Forum

Film and Music

Belated History: Revisiting Atom Egoyan's "Ararat"

By Hovig Tchalian



It may seem unusual to review a film released almost four years ago. But as we enter the first year of the tenth decade of commemorating the Armenian Genocide, Atom Egoyan's "Ararat" (2002) presents an ideal opportunity to do so in the context of the film's central theme, the uncanny act of remembering—again.

"Ararat" is a powerful, reverent and unquestionably personal look at the ravages of the Genocide, both immediate and more distant. But the film as a whole is also deeply flawed, precisely because of its personal nature.

Like Egoyan's other films, the premise of "Ararat" is complex and multi-layered. It revolves ostensibly around the making of a film about the Genocide by Edward Saroyan (played by Charles Aznavour), a well-known director now well past his prime. In typical Egoyan fashion, the stories of the other characters weave themselves into the central story of the making of Saroyan's film: Raffi, the main character (played credibly by David Alpay), is in love with his step-sister, Celia; she is locked in struggle with her mother, Ani (played by Egoyan's wife, Arsinée Khanjian); Ani is an art historian interested in Arshile Gorky (played movingly by Simon Abkarian) and his representation of himself and his mother, which Celia accuses her of using as a way of coming to terms with the death (or, according to Celia, her murder) of her second husband, Celia's father; the film's producer, Rouben (played by Eric Bogosian), hires Ani as a consultant, in order to help add elements of Gorky's biography as a plotline in the film.

The stories converge on Raffi's attempt to bring (or perhaps sneak) several rolls of film into the United States that he claims to have shot in Anatolia (present-day Eastern Turkey, historically Western Armenia) for use in the production. An aging customs officer, David (played ably by Christopher Plummer), is the only person who stands in his way. David is himself close to retirement and having trouble adjusting to his divorced son's relationship with his half-Turkish gay lover (played by Elias Koteas), an actor who winds up playing the part of the main Turkish antagonist in Saroyan's film, Jevdet Bey.

As is clear from the extended synopsis above, the various elements of the film make for a complex storyline. Though it can be argued that some of the details are "wasted" here (other, better films, of Egoyan's are far more "efficient" and less heavy-handed), there is still a clear purpose to them. For instance, the twin details of the director's waning talents—a fact mentioned off-handedly by Raffi—and the customs officer's impending retirement—revealed slowly throughout—are subtle but significant. Together, they represent the film's central concern, what we might call the "latency" or "belatedness" of history—in other words, the difficulty of proving after the fact an event that took place in the past. We understand that the Genocide narrative in the imaginary film is told too late to change the facts but, equally, struggling even to transmit them meaningfully to posterity. Like its director, the film is tragically past its prime. The same may be said of any attempt to capture the full weight of history, a fact that Egoyan (as a director of the film that tells its own, similar story) recognizes all too well.

The two aging characters and the structure of the film-within-a-film repeat themselves across a host of other dualities: we find out that Ani has been married twice, first to Raffi's father, who was killed in an attempt to assassinate a Turkish diplomat, and second to Celia's father, who apparently (and like Gorky) committed suicide; we discover that Raffi is actually sneaking *two* sets of films across the border, one set of rolls (that may in fact contain Heroin) given to him by the Turkish soldier who helped him get into view of Ararat and a roll of film that he took on his own camcorder that includes a shot of the Madonna and child in Aghtamar that mirrors Gorky's painting; we are also told that Gorky painted that image in 1934, as a way of coming to terms with the killing of his mother in 1915 (an act that Ani is trying to uncover and understand in the present).

Such parallels, sometimes subtle and sometimes less so, all build on the idea of belatedness. They do not represent dualities so much as an almost endless string of repetitions and revisions, of strange but hopeful attempts, as I suggested earlier, to remember—again. By the end of the film, the sheer number and dizzying array of motifs in the film come perilously close to overwhelming its subject as well as its viewer.

A surprisingly effective repetition in the film is the one that involves Ali, who plays the part of the Turkish official, Jevdet Bey, in Saroyan's film. He is a half-Turkish American citizen who reveals during the course of filming that he has trouble believing that the Genocide was ever more than a civil disturbance and those killed much more than casualties of war. Raffi's futile attempt to convince him otherwise is more than an act of will. His all-too-human response of confronting a Genocide denier—in the person of Ali—becomes at the same time a heroic attempt to reach back into and reverse history itself—in the person of Jevdet Bey. History and art collide in Raffi's personal encounter with collective memory and the reconstruction of historical experience.

The personal nature of Raffi's encounter ensures the emotional and artistic integrity of the film, its heart and soul. But surprisingly, it also represents the film's undoing. The delicate balance between art and tragedy represented in Raffi's experience begins to unravel as we extend it to include Egoyan's own experience of making a quite personal film about the Genocide. From this broader perspective, the film is unable to navigate the fine line between art and historical commentary. In that sense, the complex associations among the film's various elements must be seen as a heroic but doomed attempt to capture the fullness of the Genocide and its implications, both personal and collective. To put it differently, the film puts forward the idea that a historical event is infinitely complex, all the while attempting to shed light on what actually happened. Not surprisingly, reviews of the film have described it either as "slanted" or "committed," a distinction that even a filmmaker of Egoyan's talents would be hard-pressed to overcome.

As mentioned earlier, the film's complex plot converges on Raffi's attempt to sneak the rolls of film out of Turkey and into the States, and in the film's rationale, into the light of day. The customs officer, David, suspects that the roll given to Raffi by the soldier contains drugs. David explains that many of those who ingest those drugs to sneak them past the officers, when confronted with the crime, get so nervous that the packets explode in their system, causing an immediate overdose. The conversation parallels the very first scene in the film, in which Aznavour's character, Saroyan, tries to get a pomegranate ("nour") past customs. (It also parallels the imagined story in Saroyan's film, in which Gorky fails in his attempt to get a letter about the Turkish siege on Van to the American authorities and is caught by Jevdet Bey.) When David refuses to allow Saroyan to bring the fruit across the border, Saroyan ingests the seeds instead, explaining that he expects them to bring him luck. (We find out later that his mother, a deportee, had a single pomegranate with her on her journey and survived by ingesting a seed a day and considering it a full meal.) The most obvious parallel in all these cases is to the truth at the heart of the Genocide, which starts as a letter of distress in Saroyan's film and

becomes, in Egoyan's, both pomegranate seed and packet of heroin, sustaining to those who would give it life and a potentially explosive issue to those intent on suppressing it.

The film's resolution, if there is one, comes in the form of Raffi's liberation. David releases him from customs, accepting the various lies he has told as a way of getting at the truth, of imagining its possibility. This act in turn leads to David's acceptance of his son and sets everything that has come before it awash in the light of hope. It is reminiscent of perhaps the single most affecting moment in the film, in which Gorky, struggling to paint his mother's portrait, gives himself over to the music playing on his phonograph and dances to it, palette and paintbrush in hand. Egoyan has earlier shown us captive Armenian women made to dance by Turkish soldiers, a scene that transforms Gorky's, by contrast, into the ultimate act of imagination and hope, a dance on the grave of history itself.

The film's final scene is of Gorky's mother sewing a button back onto her son's jacket. The button is missing in Gorky's famous portrait but hidden from view, covered over by a flower his mother gives him to hold over it just before the photograph is taken. The humble act of sewing it back on stands in for the far more difficult goal of setting history right, after the fact. It presents the film's hopeful answer to the problems posed by history's belatedness.

"Ararat" is not Atom Egoyan's finest film. That distinction belongs to "The Sweet Hereafter" (1997), a simple, graceful and ultimately more powerful meditation on the effects of a school bus crash on the residents of a Midwestern town. The earlier film does not try as hard to confront the full impact of its tragedy, though one admittedly smaller in scope. Paradoxically, Egoyan's personal feelings about the events depicted in "Ararat" render it a painfully personal attempt to address an unresolved historical tragedy in all its complexity. But it is worth revisiting, if only to confront the immensity and hope of the enterprise.

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