

Critics' Forum

Film

Notes on Three Films Screened at the 2010 Arpa Film Festival: Exploring the Modes of Representation in *Barking Island*, *The Third Rider*, and *Aghet: A Genocide*

By Myrna Douzjian

The Arpa Film Festival is arguably one of the most exciting international cultural events in Los Angeles. The thirteenth annual festival took place during the week of September 21 to 26, 2010. For me, it was *the* Armenian arts event of the year, featuring as it did the work of many Armenian directors as well as films with Armenian-related themes. Some highlights included Serge Avedikian's animated film, *Chienne d'Histoire* [*Barking Island*]; Gor Baghdasaryan's documentary, *Yerord dziavorë* [*The Third Rider*]; and Eric Friedler's documentary, *Aghet: Ein Völkermord* [*Aghet: A Genocide*].



Barking Island (<http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/archives/ficheFilm/id/11024494.html>)

Barking Island (2010) won the Palm d'Or for the best short film at the Cannes Film Festival this year. The film is set in the Constantinople of 1910, as the new Young Turk government decides to put an end to the problem of stray dogs in the city. The film depicts the painful fate of the dogs, who are separated from their families as they are rounded up, then deported to an island, where they bark incessantly and are ultimately left to starve to death. Subtle but significant details in the film – the placement of a book entitled *The Committee of Progress* in the center of the Turkish official's desk; photos of dogs as pets in the civilized European world – highlight the irony of the situation: this inhumane plan is carried out in the name of progress.

In a short fifteen minutes, Avedikian manages to arouse a startlingly deep sympathy in the viewer for these animated dogs. The film ends with a caption informing viewers that in 1910, 30,000 dogs were deported from Constantinople to the island of Ochia, where they were “left to their own devices.” The film’s thematic focus on the government’s move to purge the city of stray dogs can clearly be read as an allusion to the Armenian Genocide, eerily suggesting that the brutal eradication of the dogs foreshadows this later moment in history. The film highlights an important question, seldom asked, that straddles the thin line between history and fiction: *What does it mean to read one set of historical events as a metaphor for another?*

While the deportation of dogs defines the historical focus of *Barking Island*, the Genocide is its metaphorical subtext. So while the film makes no explicit mention of the Genocide of the Armenians, Avedikian subtly connects the two historical moments in the film’s title. The English translation, “barking island,” fails to capture the meaning of the original French, literally “dog of history.” The reference to the dogs as belonging to history bolsters the case for a metaphorical reading. The French title renders the dogs metaphorical, almost allegorical, stand-ins not only for their kind but for the fate of their human counterparts, the Armenians.

The film’s mode of representation, animation, also tends toward the starkly fictional, an overtly artistic creation offering no pretense of the real. By making it the film’s unspoken concern, Avedikian brilliantly addresses the notion of the Genocide as unrepresentable. Its representation in animated form – in effect twice removed from its historical antecedent, once in the allegory of the dogs, and once again in animated form – offers a brilliant and unexpected solution to the central problem of postmodernism, the impossibility of representing truth and history.

Avedikian received the film festival’s Career Achievement Award. In his acceptance speech, he spoke about the idea of the “true witness,” which he described as “fragmented” and “torn apart.” He also explained that the arts help us to feel more deeply and to better understand the world. His words perfectly capture the spirit of *Barking Island*. Avedikian’s film about the eradication of dogs provides a new lens with which to view the Genocide – one that sees history as a chain of fragments that speak to, and of, one another.

The Third Rider (2008) is a documentary comprised of interviews with Armenian citizens of various ages, social classes, and professions. It received financial support from the Golden Apricot Fund for Cinema Development, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), and OSCE (The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), as part of the Tolerance without Borders Project. The film presents different definitions of intolerance, through the words of the various interviewees. The director simultaneously depicts a parallel, unscripted story of children playing in a playground. The documentary cuts between the answers of the interviewees and scenes that portray difficulties in interaction among the children. The intersecting stories suggest a parallel between the adults’ intolerant views and the children’s inability to play together harmoniously.

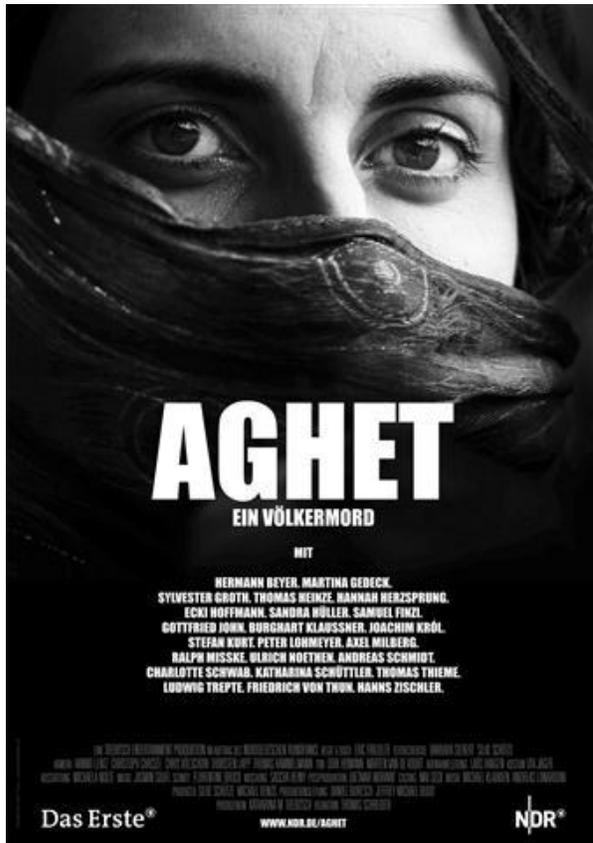
The film opens with interviews of older Armenian citizens, who complain about the youth of the nation. One interviewee criticizes young people for listening to the music of a “nigger uglier than a monkey.” His words would make any socially and culturally tolerant viewer cringe, while they suggest that racism is a non-issue for this particular gentleman and, by extension, in some circles within the Armenian community. Other interviewees lament the fact that the youth listen to what amounts to noise; they are disrespectful; they are stupid; and they walk around half-naked, with their stomachs exposed. The film then cuts to the children playing in the park, saying things like, “I want to play alone” and “I don’t feel like it.” By juxtaposing the children’s words against preceding interviews, *The Third Rider* yokes the independence the children demonstrate directly to the older generation’s grievances. And yet, it’s ultimately unclear whether the film depicts the children’s conflicts as a result of the world view they have adopted from the adults or whether the portrayal of their attitudes functions as a comment on the childishness of the adult interviewees’ opinions.

The theme of pitting the old generation against the new culminates in interviews with a young man and woman, who argue that the older generation doesn’t want to understand anything that’s different. What remains unresolved is the status of the more rebellious youth depicted earlier in the film. The viewer is still left wondering about the perspective of the half-naked young women and the young men with earrings described by the older interviewees but never represented in the documentary.

The film also addresses the tension between Armenians in Armenia and those in the Diaspora. Here, the film’s focus on intolerance within a community intersects Avedikian’s concern with intolerance outside it. One interviewee, for example, expresses his frustration at the “stereotype” of Armenians in Armenia as dishonest; but he immediately undercuts his own logic by reversing the statement and suggesting that Diaspora Armenians are far less honest than Armenians in Armenia. He follows that statement with an even more deplorable one: Armenians in the Diaspora benefitted from the Genocide, because they ended up living in the most civilized countries of the world, while Armenians in Armenia were left to suffer. The interviewee conveniently ignores the physical, cultural, and monetary losses borne by generations of Armenians as the result of the Genocide, instead casting Diaspora Armenians as exploitative capitalists. The documentary then cuts, once again, to the children on the playground “othering” their peers, arguing about who is Armenian and who is the “enemy,” situating the interviewee’s limited perspective within the larger discord that seems to characterize the Armenian community itself.

Economic inequities obviously plague the interviewees’ perceptions of others; the film convincingly argues that the specific instances of intolerance it documents stem from larger socio-economic problems and conditions. The film leaves its audience with a final message of tolerance – it closes with a shot of homes in Armenia and the voice of a beggar in the background shouting, “I’m starving, my people, please help me!” The woman’s words suggest both her literal hunger for food as well as the film’s metaphorical hunger for tolerance and understanding. While remaining true to the most basic

understanding of documentary as a factual sub-genre of film, *The Third Rider*, like *Barking Island*, uneasily straddles the line between fact and fiction, history and narrative.



Aghet: A Genocide (<http://asbarez.com/83284/schiff-to-host-capitol-hill-premiere-of-acclaimed-armenian-genocide-documentary-aghet/>)

Eric Friedler received the festival's Armin T. Wegner Humanitarian Award for his *Aghet: A Genocide*. In a word, this film is *the* Armenian Genocide documentary *par excellence*, presenting the Genocide and the events surrounding it in the form of a well-documented history lesson. In a sense, the film revisits and reconstructs the Genocide's historical archive, one document at a time. Its sources include German and American consular reports; the memoirs of US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau; the memoirs of missionaries and other witnesses; and print and television news reports. German actors play the role of witnesses and historical figures by narrating the events as the various sources have recorded them. They tell their stories in an unaffected tone, conveying a sense of both deep sorrow and unequivocal truth. By emphasizing the actual content of their speech and avoiding any over-dramatization, the film renders the narrators' words all the more powerful. *Aghet: A Genocide* successfully re-traces the narrative arc that *Barking Dogs* only suggests. While Avedikian's film moves away from history to metaphor, to allegory, Friedler's uses the narrators' direct and unembellished accounts of the events to bring the film as close as possible to a factual representation of history.

It would be apt to characterize *Aghet: A Genocide* as a representation of the grand narrative of the Genocide as nearly all Armenians know it. Not only does the documentary present a detailed chronology of events, but it also notably refutes denialist claims that the Armenians were deported because they posed a threat to the Ottoman state. It responds to this type of justification by asking reasonable questions: Why were defenseless women, children and the elderly deported? Why was the deportation carried out in *all* parts of the empire, even where there was no threat of war? If extermination wasn't the ultimate goal, why were the deportees forced to go without food or drink? The filmmaker does not conceal the documentary's powerful push to expose Turkey's efforts to rewrite the history of the Genocide.

Aghet: A Genocide also explains the relevance of the Genocide today. It includes footage that presents speeches delivered by President Obama, deliberations on the Genocide resolution in the US Congress, the sensitivity of US relations with Turkey, and Hrant Dink's assassination. The film concludes with the potent message that the Genocide remains highly significant. The closing shot depicts Armenians in Armenia mourning the death of Hrant Dink, while a lady holds a sign that reads "1,500,000 + 1," effectively conveying the message that the Genocide continues on into the present, as history and, tragically, in fact.¹

The use of the term catastrophe in the documentary's title indicates the filmmaker's nuanced understanding of the Event as something beyond human memory and understanding. At the same time, equating this term with the politically charged notion of genocide indicates the film's basic motivation – to prove that the Catastrophe was genocide. The attempt encapsulates one of the concerns of all three films – the fundamental question of the distinction between history and fiction. While the other two films leave the question largely unresolved, *Aghet: A Genocide* makes a clear push for historical truth. As a result, while most fact seekers will ultimately leave this film feeling satisfied, others may come away with feelings of ambivalence and unease. As Marc Nichanian compellingly notes, "We claim all over the world that we have been "genocided"; we relentlessly need to prove our own death. We are still in the claws of the executioner. We still belong to the logic of the executioner, through and through" (Marc Nichanian. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003). So while it's certainly gratifying to have one's history recognized in a responsible way, the attempt at historical representation still leaves in its wake a host of disturbing questions about the Genocide: Is that really *all* that happened? What constitutes genuine resolution? And, for how long will we carry the burden of proof in the self-destructive cycle that Nichanian identifies? Nevertheless, *Aghet: A Genocide* does a terrific job of convincing its audience of the veracity of its portrayal of the unfathomable.

¹ One can't help but wonder whether the film's harsh condemnation of Turkey is motivated by contemporary tensions between Germans and Turks. However, the film's material also unequivocally asserts German complicity in the Genocide perpetrated by the Turkish government. Although, as a powerful Turkish ally, the German government had the power to put an end to the Genocide, Germany remained silent on the issue. Not only that, but as one interviewee laments, the Turks "were using [German] guns." Friedler presents material that excuses neither the German nor the Turkish government. In so doing, he calls for recognition and reparations.

Although artistically and thematically distinct, and spanning genres from cartoon to documentary, the three films *Barking Island*, *The Third Rider*, and *Aghet: A Genocide* tend toward the “real” in thought-provoking ways that often leave the viewer disturbed but, at the same time, undoubtedly enriched.

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