

Critics' Forum

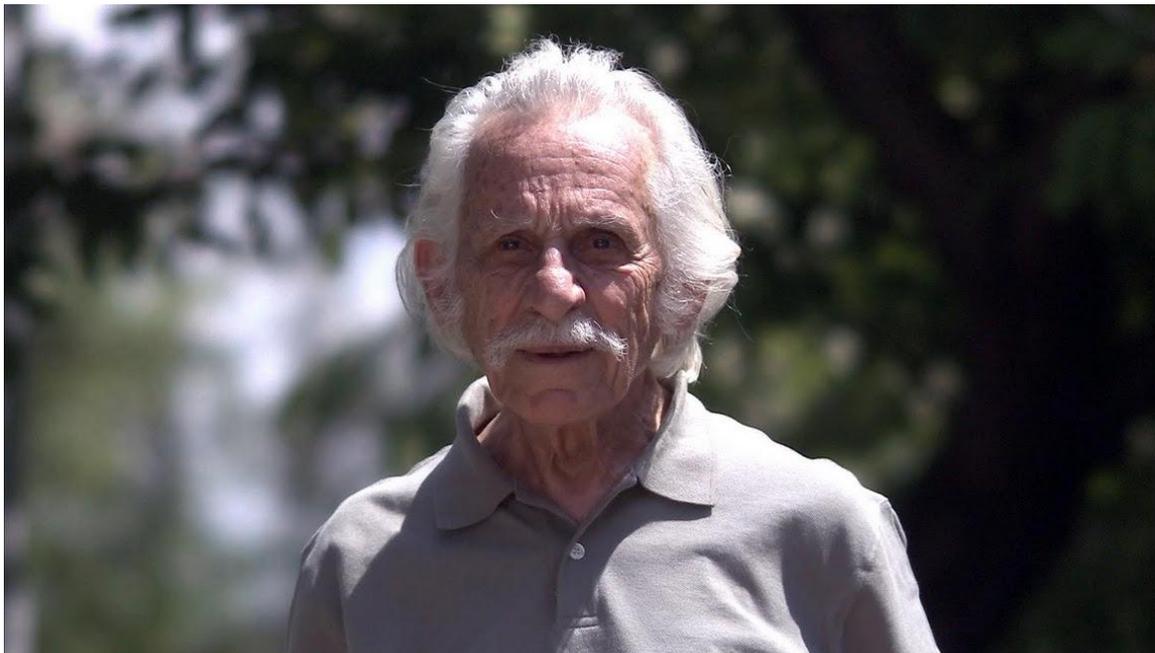
Film

Filmic Approaches to Catastrophe: Narrative and Trauma in Levon Minasian's *Le Piano* and Eric Nazarian's *Bolis*

By Myrna Douzjian

This year's Arpa International Film Festival featured two short films with a storyline informed by an historic catastrophe: Levon Minasian's *Le Piano* depicts the musical aspirations and struggles of a child virtuoso, Loussiné, who was orphaned after the earthquake in Leninakan, Armenia in 1988; Eric Nazarian's *Bolis* follows the journey of an Armenian *oud* player, Armenak, who visits Istanbul to perform in an *oud* festival and find the site of his grandfather's pre-Genocide *oud* shop. Both films deal with trauma, by conveying the humanizing and therapeutic power of music or comedy in the face of death and destruction. But the narrative technique of each film remains entirely distinct: *Le Piano* subtly addresses the earthquake through brief references and allusions, while *Bolis* explicitly spells out the effects of the Genocide on Armenak's family.

Le Piano treats the 1988 earthquake in Leninakan (present-day Gyumri) as an unspeakable, un-representable catastrophe. The film opens with a brief view of the destruction wrought by the earthquake and quickly moves to tell the story of one family and their neighborhood in Gyumri thirteen years later. The earthquake scene is juxtaposed with the skeletal frame of one of the town's ruined buildings. Through such juxtapositions, the film points subtly to the difficulty of coping with the aftermath of the earthquake – both physically and psychologically.



The film combines tragedy with comedy to create emotionally powerful effects. A grand piano is being delivered to the *domik* (a small prefabricated home) of the famous musician, Hovhannes Lalayan. When the piano arrives, the neighbors jump at the chance to help install it. But as five men carry it to the house, they realize, to their dismay, that it is wider than the doorway. They propose the humorously absurd idea of disassembling it, but Hovhannes angrily refuses. As the men discuss other possible solutions, the audience learns something that will reappear in the plot – that the Ministry of Culture has lent the piano to Hovhannes’s mute granddaughter Loussiné (Lousik) so that she can use it to practice for an internationally televised competition. One of the men then makes an even more preposterous suggestion: why not lift the house up with a crane so that they can install the piano? This suggestion is immediately followed by a brief digression on the death of Lousik’s parents and the loss of her piano during the earthquake. The cumulative effect of the scene is to hint at tragedy, while desperately trying to undercut it. So while the comic effect of the conversation is clear, the narrative also conveys a deeper purpose – by referring to Lousik’s situation only indirectly, through dialogue and allusion, the film addresses the un-representability of the earthquake, while ironically suggesting its sheer enormity.

Minasian effectively combines humor with despair elsewhere in the film. The piano never makes it into Hovhannes’s house, and in a later, suspenseful scene, he is sleeping outside in order to guard the piano. Just then, two thieves try to steal the piano, while a neighbor, Seroj, helps Hovhannes chase them away. Once the crisis has been averted, the camera catches Seroj adjusting his ridiculous-looking toupee – comic relief once again quickly tempers the dramatic tension.



The film also develops contrasts among its various thematic elements. For example, while celebrating Lousik's ability to succeed despite severe hardship, it pokes fun at hackneyed and idealized notions of culture and nation. In one scene, Ms. Galoyan, the Minister of Culture, visits Lousik in order to hear her play. Galoyan, outrageously dressed and made up, suggests that Loussiné is one of Armenia's national treasures. The Minister's lofty claim is countered by her outrageous appearance, leading the audience to question not only what she says but also the position she holds, both within and beyond the film. The film soon brings the point home – as Galoyan and a small group of locals listen to Loussiné play, an angry neighbor, Nevert, insults Galoyan by sarcastically referring to her as a “national treasure.” Nevert then proceeds to dump a pail of water on Loussiné's audience, because she is tired of hearing the romantic piece by Schubert Loussiné is playing on the piano, the only song she plays throughout the film. Here and elsewhere, through the use of direct but gentle humor, *Le Piano* portrays an otherwise painful and serious subject matter with humor and subtlety, a feat not often accomplished even in the best Hollywood films.

When Loussiné finally heads to Yerevan for the competition, her neighbor Seroj buys a big-screen television in order to watch the performance. A minor parallel story develops, recapitulating the episode of Hovhannes's piano. With the help of his neighbors, Seroj tries unsuccessfully to fit the TV through the door of his own *domik*. The group eventually gives up and watches the competition outside. Loussiné performs brilliantly and returns home. By the end of the film, the piano that was lent to her has been taken away, and she is seen “playing” the same song on a makeshift instrument – essentially a full set of piano keys drawn on a long piece of paper. The film concludes with a final tragicomic scene: Seroj brings in a crane to lift his house so that he can install his TV. The narrative takes us back one last time to the problem of rebuilding life and home in the post-earthquake community of Gyumri, only to leave it unresolved.



With its ingenious plot and impressive cast of talented actors and actresses, *Le Piano* is a brilliantly touching achievement. Though she never speaks, Loussiné communicates with the audience through her impressive stage presence and the power of her music. Like its protagonist, the beauty of *Le Piano* lies in what the film doesn't verbalize. Instead of documenting the familiar reality that the earthquake continues to have devastating effects, it grapples with the difficulty of representing it, and by extension, of grasping its full impact. The result is a film that acknowledges the complexity of its task, rendering both its subject and its treatment of it all the more painful – and poignant.

In comparison, *Bolis* takes a somewhat more predictable approach to representing a traumatic story. Through the main character, Armenak's, search for his paternal grandfather's (also named Armenak) *oud* shop, the film's plot addresses themes common to Diaspora literature and film – it focuses on the concepts of home, ancestral roots, and return. With its male protagonist and its concern for patrilineage, *Bolis* also belongs to the mainstream of Armenian fiction. During his journey, Armenak narrates the familiar "Genocide story" as it relates to his family history. The one-dimensional monologue, what we might call a monological narrative, unfortunately tends toward a didactic aesthetic, often leaving little room for interpretation.



Nevertheless, the film introduces two thought-provoking elements into an otherwise conventional project. The first involves the main character's feelings of ambivalence toward Istanbul and Turkey. Since he naturally associates Istanbul with his family's traumatic experience during the Genocide, Armenak arrives in the city expecting to hate the place. To his surprise, Armenak comes to feel that the "city is like opium – addictive." His initial readiness to reject Istanbul quickly evolves into a complex set of nuanced emotions: an appreciation of the people and the city's cultural history and a sense of nostalgia for its various spaces.

The second element of complexity, which complements Armenak's openness to the city's culture, is the connection the film emphasizes between Turks and Armenians. Nazarian suggests this link by drawing structural parallels between Armenak and the Turkish woman who lives and runs a store in the building that housed Armenak Sr.'s former *oud* shop: the woman has set out to give up her home and store, while Armenak, as we have seen, travels in the reverse direction, toward his ancestral home; Armenak visits Oudi Hrant's tombstone at the cemetery, and the Turkish woman visits her late husband's grave. Along the way, Armenak and the Turkish woman develop a bond, as they share stories about the past over coffee. Armenak's search for his grandfather's shop and the family *oud* lost during the Genocide becomes a story about replacing feelings of animosity with friendship. The film closes with Armenak performing *Sari sirun yar*. He dedicates the song to his Turkish friends, the Turkish woman, and her daughter, Aylin.

Nazarian highlights the two parallel journeys visually and metaphorically as well. As Armenak continues to play, the scene cuts to the broken face of his grandfather's *oud*. The fragment of the instrument lies in the pile of unwanted belongings that the Turkish woman is throwing away in preparation for her move. Interestingly, only the audience sees the *oud*; Armenak never finds it. In the question-and-answer session that followed the screening, Nazarian explained that Armenak's inability to find the *oud* signifies that there is a great deal we can never know about the past. We might add also that, metaphorically, the story of reconciliation takes precedence over the material recovery of the past in *Bolis*. Nazarian's strategy here resembles Atom Egoyan's project in *Ararat*, a film that treats genocide denial and tolerance within interwoven relationships across various levels – familial bonds, love relations, and workplace settings, even ethnic divides. Approaches like Egoyan's and Nazarian's acknowledge the issue of denial, while tempering it with calls for cross-cultural tolerance.

But are Armenian audiences ready to interpret *Bolis* in this way? In the question-and-answer session that followed the film, Nazarian explained that he chose the *oud* as an instrument that transcends borders. He said that his goal was to create a "bridge between Armenians and Turks through cinema." But watching *Bolis* made me wonder whether there could ever be a critical distance between Armenian viewers and a text that deals with the Genocide. Judging from the reaction to the film and the almost exclusive focus on the Genocide story, I found it difficult to believe so. To my disappointment, all but two of the questions posed by the audience revolved around the politics of making a film that mentions the Genocide in Turkey: "How was it possible?" "What were the difficulties the filmmaker encountered?" The audience's fixations on the politics rather

than the aesthetics of the film brought a larger question to mind: “Will Armenians forever crave the retelling of *the Genocide narrative*?” Juxtaposing the filmic approaches to catastrophe in *Bolis* and *Le Piano* offers a site for broaching this issue. The comparison suggests that a nuanced approach to representing the Genocide in fiction may lie somewhere between the two films’ narrative strategies.

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