

Critics' Forum

Literature

Spotlighting the Exclusions of Cultural Memory: A Collaborative Effort by the Filmmaker Eulmessekian and the Poet Grenier

By Talar Chahinian

Artistic collaboration is a productive site where perspectives can meet and reshape each other, generating new imaginings for the artists involved. A film and poetry event sponsored by the Glendale Public Library and Abril bookstore on November 13, 2011 did just that, offering far more than a mere exchange between the featured artists, filmmaker Hrayr Anmahouni Eulmessekian and poet Arpine Konyalian Grenier. The attendees could not have anticipated that it was they, as spectators and audience members, who would become key contributors to the collaboration, and in fact, that it was their own reading – and interpretation – practices that would be featured as the evening's performance.

Whether willingly or reluctantly, audience members were caught in a struggle to extract meaning from the simultaneous viewing of Eulmessekian's film, *Bruitage* and reading from Grenier's volume of poetry, *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins*. The task was made challenging by the fact that the film was not structured according to a plot, dialogue or linear narrative; and the poetry featured an abundance of references and abstract images. Provided with little direction and no obvious context, audience members were left to project meaning onto the works of art by drawing on their own experiences and memories. The result provided all of us a fascinating glimpse into the trans-cultural exclusions in our own tendencies vis-à-vis cultural memory – in other words, we realized how our own diasporic cultural memory subtly reinforces certain interpretations and exclude others.

The flyer advertising the event claimed that the mutual explorations of the filmmaker and the poet seek to create “a wisdom that comes from cultural memory and its subtractions.” Even in this depiction, specifying which cultural memory or whose cultural memory is being referred to would be mere conjecture, since neither work offers an explicit reference. But there is even more to the issue of cultural memory – although it can be understood as a general, more universal category, I would like to argue that the event at Abril bookstore questioned the fundamental assumptions underlying the universality of the concept; when experienced in conjunction with each other, *Bruitage* and *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins* critique Armenian diasporic memory's singularity and exclusivity, particularly with regard to its omission of a hybrid, transnational understanding of culture.

Indeed, no culture in the world develops in isolation and without exchange with other cultures. Of course, this exchange is more pronounced in the context of diaspora, wherein a dispersed culture operates within a different, majority culture. Armenian diasporic culture, which consists of transnational communities operating across multiple majority cultures, clings to a singular cultural memory in an effort to preserve what it considers to be “purely” Armenian and under threat of assimilation. Although

Anmahouni and Grenier live and produce in the United States, both artists come from Beirut, Lebanon. Drawing from the polyglot environment of their past, they highlight diasporic memory's missing trans-cultural context, searching for a more fluid and inclusive depiction – an alternative archive – of the self within and against that collective memory.

In Hrayr Anmahouni Eulmessekian's 2006 film, *Bruitage* (running time 58 min.), the camera zooms in, out, and across a series of black and white photographs at a slow, deliberate pace. The moving image is accompanied by an audio track consisting of "incidental" or "background" sounds that loosely correspond to the images. For instance, in the film's introductory sequence, a recording of natural, outdoor noises accompanies images of nature. There is no visible foreground, making it difficult to decipher the context of the photographs and locate their content – to understand what they "mean." Without a clear physical or cultural referent, the grainy, close-up images seem reference-free and invite interpretation; or more accurately, they invite projection of meaning based on personal experience and memory.

When people begin to appear in the photographs, the content becomes more legible – an urban space, in the 50s or 60s, probably in the Middle East. Yet even that context is too feeble to provide a clear meaning: the people photographed are too distant; we still see no foreground; no faces and, therefore, no stories. When people finally emerge in the background, they are accompanied by language in the audio track. But a certain distance remains here, too – just as the faces of the people in the photographs are out of reach, so are the words of the languages being spoken. The spoken word comes to us muffled, layered by noises and voices from multiple directions, and often dubbed by the sound of a musical instrument. Although we can recognize a mélange of languages – Armenian, Arabic, Turkish – we cannot determine exactly what is being said.

The audio track of the film, *Bruitage*, is precisely what its French title suggests – the artificial reconstruction of natural noises and sounds that accompany the action in films, television, or theater. The convergence of these "incidental sounds" or background noises and the shots of the moving image in the background provide the conceptual framework of the film. During the discussion following the event, we learned that the images shown in the film come from family photographs taken in pre-civil war Lebanon. The camera's zooming effects, along with familiar incidental, background noise, have helped us arrive at the deep background of family portraits and family histories.

"Deep background" is a journalistic term referring to information offered by a source that may not be included in the article but that nevertheless enhances the journalist's understanding of an event. By stripping away everything but the deep background of family photographs, Eulmessekian's *Bruitage* forces us to confront the multi-cultural, trans-national, and hybrid context of our diasporic familial experiences, and in turn, our diasporic cultural memory. What we see and hear on the screen are the "subtractions" that diasporic memory makes in order to preserve that which it calls Armenian. Eulmessekian suggests that just as in the journalist's understanding of the event, "deep background" or context is vital to one's "telling" of the self, and thereby, one's narrating

of cultural memory. In the case of the Armenian diaspora, cultural memory must be understood *not* as a static and purified entity but as a multi-faceted and dynamic product of encounters between more than one “culture,” between foreground “content” and background “context.” A more essentialist, less fluid understanding of cultural memory that ignores the interaction of these dynamic forces risks constricting a diasporic culture’s progress and production, especially in a transnational setting.

The exploration of faceless images and wordless sounds in Eulmessekian’s *Bruitage* parallels the work of poet Arpine Konyalian Grenier. In *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins*, Grenier seeks to explore what lies behind the word. Reading selections from her poetry over the presentation of *Bruitage*, Grenier offered yet another interpretive platform for the audience, another potential layer of context. Her lines of poetic prose, bearing an arbitrary relationship with the film, provided no opportunities for interpretive closure, either for their own meaning or the film’s. Much like Eulmessekian’s work, Grenier’s words evoke the audience’s diasporic cultural memory and foreground its subtractions. In other words, she focuses on the fluid or adaptable features of identity to remind her audience of what rigid and nationalist formulations of identity exclude.

Grenier claimed that “identity, like money, is utilized then.” Grenier’s intentionally cryptic statement critiques the process of collective identification (the figurative selling and buying of a singular form of identity) by dismantling its established markers (such as language and religion) and celebrating its fluidity. Elsewhere, *Concession Stand*, a collection that consists of eight poetic essays, develops this critique regarding the commodification of identity through a two-tier discussion of language. On the macro level, her essays are concerned with problematizing language as a system by which we ascribe meaning to the world around us. On the micro level, her commentary on language problematizes the possibility of a “mother tongue” in a transnational setting and leads to her critique of rigid conceptualizations of identity in the Armenian diasporic context.

The presentation of Grenier’s poetry at the Abril event confronts its audience with the dangers of over-emphasizing cultural identity, to the detriment of a culture’s dynamism. Her poetry also suggests that culture and cultural identity are not found or given, but constructed. “As an Armenian American poet,” Grenier writes, “I attempt to undo this process by constructing (not describing) a space at the edge of meaning whereby identity is released back to its neutral non-zero field” (47). In many ways, this is precisely Eulmessekian’s task, providing a bridge for the effective collaboration on display at the Abril event. *Bruitage* and *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins*, though fashioned independently, both draw our attention to the exclusion of the broader, trans-cultural context of Armenian diasporic memory and identity. Performed together, particularly in an Armenian setting, the works compel audience members to re-examine the exclusions in their reading and interpretation practices, the subtle subtractions of their cultural memory.

In that sense, in her poetic writings, and in particular its presentation during the Abril event, Grenier critiques the commodification of identity in the context of an increasingly globalized world; likewise, she brings attention to the often reductive formulation of identity in the Armenian diasporic context, suggesting it leads to essentialism. In a future article, I will explore more closely Grenier's collection of published essays in *The Concession Stand* and elaborate on her discussion of language and identity.

All Rights Reserved: Critics' Forum, 2012.

Talar Chahinian holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from UCLA and lectures in the Department of Comparative World Literature at Cal State Long Beach.

You can reach her or any of the other contributors to Critics' Forum at comments@criticsforum.org. This and all other articles published in this series are available online at www.criticsforum.org. To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to www.criticsforum.org/join. Critics' Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.