

THE IMPLIED MESSAGE OF ARARAT AND ITS INTENDED AUDIENCE

Prof. Dr. Nedret KURAN-BURÇOĞLU*

I. Introductory Notes

The well known Canadian film director of Armenian origin Atom Egoyan's film *Ararat* (Ağrı Dağı) is going to be in the theaters soon, this year. The film has been publicized, reviewed and discussed widely in America and in Europe before it is shown to the public. This can be taken as an indication of a partial fulfillment of the film's goal, namely to draw the attention of a large audience to the Armenian issue. Its talented director, its carefully selected cast who are very well-known actors and actresses to the European and American public, comprising Charles Aznavour, Bruce Greenwood, Christopher Plummer, Eric Bogosian, Elias Koteas, David Alpay, Raffi Migdesyan and Arsinée Khanjian, as well as the substantial amount of financial support the film has received from Canadian, French and Armenian sources will contribute to its success as envisaged by the film's initiators.

These preparations show that *Ararat* is a carefully designed film that is intended to be the most effective stroke of a larger strategy some Armenians have been working on to prove their hypothesis of the so-called "Armenian genocide" to the whole world. The timing of the film also seems to be intentionally chosen for this purpose, which will be discussed later. A close analysis of *Ararat's* film script has revealed, that this film is a significant example from the point of view of its image-creating, image-reinforcing and stereotyping strategies that already started to show their effect during its filming process which is planned to continue during its show and even more so at its reception phase by particular audiences of the world to which the film is intended to appeal.

This paper attempts to look closely at the three phases of this larger phenomenon, by analysing which image-creating, stereotyping and image-propagating methods and mechanisms

* Boğaziçi University Center for European Studies Vice Director and Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies Visiting Scholar.

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have been instrumentalized during the filming process, how these mechanisms have been combined with cinematic effects and integrated within the film, and what sort of impact is envisaged on different individual audiences at the reception phase of this film.

II. The Film

The film *Ararat* is a palimpsest of different layers in terms of symbols, imagery, themes and scenes, and there is a continuous shift from one layer to the other from the beginning to the end, setting up links between the tragic past of the Armenians in Van, Turkey, during the World War I, at the second decade of the twentieth century, and their presence in the migrated country, that is the United States of America, and finally their present lives in Canada, i.e. between their memories of the past linked with their former motherland, and the reality they experience now in their present country, that is Canada. While these shifts are taking place, something is tried to be kept alive and this is the main theme of the film, the so-called "Armenian genocide" that is claimed to have happened in Van, Turkey, in 1915, during World War I, which the Turkish government refuses to recognize. It is made clear in the film that as this is not recognized by the Turkish government as a "committed crime", it remains an unresolved issue and a pain in the hearts and minds of the Armenians. And there is no doubt that the major intention of the film *Ararat* is to present this event to the general public from the Armenian perspective, convince the multipliers, and receive support from the decision-making mechanisms in the world to put pressure on Turkey to have the so-called genocide recognized. To achieve this goal, the following methods and mechanisms have been skillfully mobilized in the film.

The Question of Legitimacy: "Illusion" or "Reality?"

The "genocide" theme is repeated throughout the film with "as a matter of 'accepted' fact" attitude, but at the same time its truthfulness is tried to be secured through various means. One of the major devices that are used to achieve this is the first sentence of the film: "a true story about living proof", meaning, that the film is not an "illusion" or a fiction, but a "true story". As it is later on told to the audience, the film is based on a book of an American missionary, called Clarence Ussher, who had been in Van during the relocation of the Armenians by the Turkish Government in 1915, and who had published his memoirs after he returned home, in Boston, in 1917. By showing this book as a reliable source, and a respectable American as its author as the alibi of the horrible events, that are claimed to have happened to the Armenians, in 1915-1916 in Turkey, the director aims to justify first, the truthfulness of the "genocide" and second, to gain the sympathy of the Americans to the film and its theme in particular, and that of the larger audience in general.

Ensuring Justification: Representation of the Turk as the "Villain"

Other effective tools that are used in the film to convince the audience about the truthfulness of the so-called "genocide" are the horrible scenes that are carefully integrated within the film, some of them signifying the deportation of the Armenian crowds that are shown walking in Anatolian deserts in destitute wrapped in rugs, others showing corpses of hundreds of Armenians spread on the ground and hanging on sticks while hungry children and dogs are running among them and still others, that show how the innocent Armenian women are raped in front of their children, burned alive and how Armenian children are brutally tortured by the Turks.

Reinforcing Historical Stereotypes: The Turk as the "Enemy of Christianity"

These are extremely sensational heart-breaking scenes that are intended to be carved in the visual memory of the audiences. In all these scenes the Turks are represented as "brutal species" and "ferocious beings", who would make no distinction between men and women, adults and children and would torture and kill them

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all in cold blood. European audiences will easily associate this image with a negative Turkish stereotype that has commonly been used throughout Europe for centuries, in various literary and especially in visual sources that range from altar figures to illustrations in popular Medieval literature. The book of the German philistine Hans Sachs from Byzantian letters provoking the European public to Crusades against the Turks to a series of speeches of the German Protestant leader Martin Luther who was trying to gain supporters for his version of interpretation of Christianity. All these examples, that can be seen as both, cause and effect of xenophobia, reflect a common pattern, namely they all strive to gain supporters *vis a vis* the "other",¹ that is in these cases an enemy of one's own, that has to be shown as a monster, combining all sorts of negative characteristics and should therefore be commonly considered as a threat for one's own existence and who therefore must be fought against together. However, "brutality" alone has not always been a sufficient motive to convince others to become allies against the Turk in European history, and very often a more effective motive has been sought for and found, and this has usually been the "other's" religion, that is Islam. So the Turk has been shown as a "heretic", "infidel", or as "believing in a different God"-which is rather deceptive- and as an "enemy of Christianity"- which is not true! This is also the case in the film Ararat: The Turk is not graceful, he doesn't pray before the meals, as he "worships to a different God". By alluding to the already existing, historical negative cliché about the Turk in European and Christian minds, Egoyan seems to reinforce this stereotype with a provision to gain himself supporters and legitimacy for his previously mentioned goal.

¹ Actually the "Other" doesn't necessarily have to signify the "enemy". The "other" is in reality the "different one" who can as well "complement the self", that is, contribute to and complete the self. In short, the "Other" doesn't have to exhibit only negative characteristics, it can as well exhibit positive aspects. As long as human beings can not discern between these different capacities of the "other" and try to appreciate them, peace among the human race can and will not be established.

Arousing the Sympathy of the Audience: Linking Christian Imagery with the Text

Christian elements are skillfully integrated into the film to arouse the emotions of the public. A multilayered Christian imagery is used throughout the film, that focuses on a "mother and son image". This starts with a figure of Madonna and Christ carved on the wall of the church in Aghtamar, in Van,

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continues with a photograph of Sushan and her son Arshile Gorky, who later becomes a famous painter in New York. The photograph was taken in Van, in 1912, with the purpose to be sent to the father Gorky who apparently sensed the so-called Armenian "genocide" a few years in advance, and migrated to the USA to prepare a future for his family. This photograph then gives inspiration to the artist Arshile Gorky, who makes a painting in his house, in New York, in 1935 depicting the same scene. This connotes to a loyalty of the artist to the Armenian common past, as promised by him to his dying mother in Van, in 1915. The artist later on, decides to erase the hands of his mother from the painting indicating to the addressees, that something is missing here, which obviously signifies the unresolved Armenian issue that is mentioned above. The image of the mother's affectionate hand also alludes to the healing hand of the Jesus Christ which symbolizes miracles. The fourth layer of this imagery is found in Ani's book, depicting Arshile Gorky's life from which Ani reads excerpts to her students in her history of art class. The fifth layer of it comes to the fore in Ani's lecture at the art gallery, in which she mentions the wall carvings in the church in Aghtamar in connection with the photograph of the "mother and son", and the painting of Arshile Gorky. The sixth layer of the image reveals itself in the Saroyan's film, that is the film which is filmed within the film Ararat, that combines this multilayered imagery with the story found in the American missionary Clarence Ussher's book and completes the film within the film. The mother in this imagery, who represents the past, had the following three last requests from her son, who represents the future, before she died in his arms: he should not forget his language, he should not forget his religion, he should never forget what had happened in 1915 – 1916 to the Armenians in Turkey and should always keep it on the agenda. Coincidentally,

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Edward Saroyan's, the film director's mother had the same last requests from her son which are shown to signify a common mission of the younger generation of the Armenians that had been handed over to them by their ancestors and which is waiting to be fulfilled. This powerful imagery of the "mother and son", that is repeated in every instance of the film, will naturally appeal to the emotions and the common conscience of a large audience who may easily identify themselves with the corresponding figures and feel sympathy for them.

**Biblical and Mythological Symbols and their Connotations:
Pomegranate; Mount Ararat and Noah's Ark**

The film's name is intentionally chosen as Ararat which signifies on the one hand, the lost "motherland" for the Armenians who now live in the "diaspora", and on the other hand, it alludes to the biblical story of Noah's Ark. As it is a well-known biblical story, Noah's Ark which was designed to rescue human race from being wiped out of the earth by a terrible storm, had disappeared on the mount Ararat, but people still believe that one day its remnants will be found. Noah's Ark, and the Mount Ararat which is still hiding the former in itself are used metaphorically here, i.e. as a shelter for the Armenians to keep them from being wiped out of the earth by the terrible storm, that is the "genocide". There are two major references in the film to these symbols. David, the customs officer, who is a pious Christian, buys his grandson a Noah's Ark as a birthday present and tells him the story related to it. This makes the audience ready for the association of the events in the film with the biblical story. The second reference is more powerful and noteworthy: By looking at the huge representation of Mount Ararat Edward says, "Mount Ararat. When I was a boy, my mother used to tell me this was ours, even though it was far away. I used to dream of a way to approach it, to make it belong to who I was...to who I became. Will this film bring us closer?" This passage, in which Edward – as a human being - reflects upon the

link between his identity formation and his belongingness to a desired land, which is voiced in the film by Edward - the film's producer - himself, implies very clearly the ultimate intention of the film's initiators, namely the fulfillment of the four phased strategy of the Armenian dream, as well as reveals what function this film is expected to fulfill.

Another symbol used in the film is the pomegranate, a fruit which Edward tries to bring into the country, but he is refused to get it in. However, as he is a "smart" man, he finds a "clever" solution, he cuts the fruit open, takes the seeds into his mouth and smuggles them into the country without overruling the custom's law. The pomegranate signifies "luck", "blessing" and "patience". Edward's mother used to eat it, seed by seed, and consoled herself as if each seed had meant a meal when they had nothing to eat. The message here is the following; even in tough situations there is always a way out if you have the necessary tools and if you can play the game according to its rules. All you need is "patience" and "smartness" which the characters of the film have. By this the film is attempting to give hope and optimism to those who have been striving to reach their final goal, that is to those who have such dreams like the one expressed by Edward above, but also encourage those who haven't thought about such a goal yet.

Juxtaposing Armenian and Turkish Characters: Stereotyping Continued

It is important to note that almost all the Armenian characters in the film are shown in a positive light. They are assigned the following qualities:

Edward Saroyan: Elegant, respectable, speaking with French accent, very famous film producer.

Ani: Art historian, writer of a book on Arshile Gorky, professor, intellectual qualities.

Rouben: The screen writer, an intense (?) looking man, he has worked on this film for five years, a meticulous researcher.

Martin: Handsome leading man, playing the part of the American missionary Clarence Usher.

Raffi: Ani's son, handsome young man, trying to find his identity, inquisitive, exemplifying human characteristics.

Celia: Attractive young woman, Ani's stepdaughter, can not get along with her stepmother, has a love-affair with Raffi, inquisitive.

Arshile Gorky: Famous Armenian painter, survivor of the genocide, loyal to his promises, conscious of his mission.

Sushan: Arshile Gorky's mother, who died of hunger in the arms of her son, in Van and had given her son a mission.

Raffi's father: Ani's husband, a member of ASALA who died in an attempt of killing a Turkish diplomat, he is "terrorist" for certain people, but a "freedom-fighter" for others.

Celia's father: Ani's husband, "died in a stupid accident"-this is Ani's version of interpretation of the event-, "committed suicide because of Ani"- this is Celia's opinion-.

Sevan: The photographer's son, slightly younger than Arshile, very sympathetic young boy who is tortured by the Mayor of Van.

David: Custom's officer, observes Christian rituals, shows human characteristics.

Philip: David's son, security guard at the art gallery, has a gay relationship with Ali, he has lost his confidence in God.

Tony: David's grandson, Philip's son, he receives advice from his pious grandfather.

Janet: Attractive young woman, Tony's mother.

Ali: Philip's gay friend, half-Turk, he is easily convinced to play the part of Cevdet Bey, the Mayor of Van as he feels honoured to act in a film made by Saroyan. He is actually used as a "tool" in return of a bottle of champagne by Edward to fulfill a certain function and then simply thrown away.

As it can be observed from the descriptions of the characters, all Armenian types in the film are either "intellectual", "artistically talented", "smart", and/or "elegant", "graceful", "good-looking", "attractive", "sympathetic" and "human" types. On the other hand, the only Turkish -half Turkish - character of the film who is Ali, is "gay", "ambivalent", "senseless", "ignorant of the events that are taking place around him", or would "care less", and who would "use the same discourse of the Turkish government" considering the issue of the so-called Armenian "genocide", ie. interpreting the events that happened in Van, in 1915-16, that is the deaths of both nations, Armenians and Turks, as the natural circumstances

of a war, of World War I. Then there is also the Mayor of Van, Cevdet Bey in the film within the film, whose part is acted by Ali as well. This is a worse character who is described by Raffi as someone who was placed in Van to "carry out the elimination of the Armenian race". Other horrible Turks are indirectly present in the film with their massacres and crimes that are extensively exhibited throughout the film. These "black and white characterizations" of the film exhibit a clear negative stereotyping of the Turks that is juxtaposed with the positive stereotyping of the Armenians which reflects the sheer prejudice and hostility of the film's director and producer against the Turks. This aspect actually reduces the reliability of the film and its director in the eyes of a critical audience and can thus be considered as one of the major fallacies of the film from the aesthetic point of view as well.

**Attempts of Gaining New Allies against the Turks:
Equating the So-called "Genocide" with the "Holocaust"**

Another strategy the film director is applying in the film is to gain the sympathy of ethnic groups and nations who have suffered under discrimination, xenophobia and racism in their past, as these groups are considered as "potential supporters" of other groups who claim to have suffered from similar animosities. In this film the Jews, who are known to have suffered from the Holocaust and are, thus, vulnerable in that respect, are targetted and are

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expected to identify themselves with the Armenians and support their strategic aims. To achieve this, the case of the Armenians in Van in 1915-16 is associated with the case of the Jews under the Nazi Regime and in the concentration camps in Dachau, Auschwitz and Treblinka in World War II. The choice of this unfortunate association, which is strongly argued about and criticised by historians, could also have the following motive; to make peace with the Jews - who constituted another *millet*

within the Ottoman Empire and with whom the Armenians did not have friendly relationships in history. However, getting the support of the influential Jewish lobby in the Western World must have been considered a great challenge for the film. A final note should be added here: while reminding the sad stories in history and appealing to the sympathy of the Jews, the film doesn't want to offend the Germans who might feel excluded from the audience by being reminded of the Holocaust. It must be for this reason that a German woman was also shown as an alibi for the so-called genocide.

Transformation of Opinions of the Armenian Youth: From Scepticism to Prejudice

At the beginning of the film the young characters don't seem to be very much involved within the so-called "genocide" issue, they would rather be interested in their own daily lives and the problems that are related to it, such as love affairs, step-mother/step-daughter relationships, family fights, divorce issues, mutual accusations, etc. It can be said that especially Raffi has a naive approach to everything that is going on around him, he is a young man with good will. In time he realizes that he has to go to

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Aghtamar and shoot a film of the environment to help the film makers complete the film with scenes depicting the original space, as they could not get a permission from the Turkish authorities to shoot this film in Van. To do this job he has to bribe the local authorities by promising them to take the tins they give him to Canada. However, the contents of these tins turn out to be drugs that may have caused Raffi a great trouble in the customs of Canada, but the Canadian custom's officer who is represented in the film as a pious Christian and an affectionate man, suspected and in the end realized that the tins contained illegal substance, let Raffi go, as he felt great sympathy for the young man after having listened to his sad story. This event adds to the negative stereotype of the Turk the following aspects, "bribery" and "drug-dealing". Actually the latter act, which is also commonly ascribed to the Armenians, is in the film projected to the Turks.

Towards the end of the film, after watching Ali's act of the Mayor of Van, Raffi also gets convinced about the truth of the so-called "genocide".

Celia passes through another development, but arrives at a similar conclusion. With these developments of minds of Raffi and Celia, who are planned to represent the Armenian youth today, the director aims to show that the message is relayed to the younger generation who at first had second thoughts about this issue because they were naive and good-willed, but in the end they also get convinced about the evil deeds of the Turks. The second message is that the Turks have not changed. They are bad as ever.

Seeking Justification for "Terrorism": The ASALA Case

Raffi's father was an ASALA terrorist and died while trying to shoot a Turkish diplomat. This case is also brought up several times in the film, as it is an often discussed phenomenon and is actually considered a stigma in the history of the Armenians. These "acts of terrorism" that targeted the Turkish government in its representatives, that is its diplomats, are tried to be shown in the film as a "fight for freedom" for which the young generation is encouraged. It should be asked here: Which freedom? And what was the impact of these events on the Turco-Armenian relationships? What is the use of pursuing this vendetta?

III. The Reception of the Film

The well-known Italian semiotician Umberto Eco talks about the "Modell Reader" in his book called *The Role of the Reader*. By this Eco means a special kind of reader² the author wants to appeal. After having decided for his "Modell Reader" the author screens out the others by applying certain strategies in his text,³ such as using a special register, a certain style and may be an encoded language the "Modell Reader" only can decode. In this way the message reaches its target and the text will be completed in the way the author had originally planned. Naturally there will also be other readers, who may read the text and even enjoy it to a certain extent without getting the concealed message of the author, just

² The concept "reader" is used here in its broader sense, meaning the actual receivers / addressees of the book/ the film.

³ The concept "text" is used as a general term here, indicating any kind of art product - literary, visual, audio-visual - that can be read, i.e. decoded, interpreted and understood. Thus the film is seen as a "text" here.

as most of the readers of the Name of the Rose - Eco's famous work- did, who had been intrigued by the idea that the film was a detective story that took place in the Middle Ages without getting the subtle critical message the author of the book actually wanted to convey. However, large audiences are always welcome for the authors, as well as for the producers, and for this reason they do not question whether all receivers have got the envisaged message of the "text" or not. On the contrary, they will enjoy the reception of their work by large audiences. However, the main issue for them is to capture the real "Modell Reader" who would get the intended message of the "text".

With its "Modell Readers"/"target audiences", "intended messages", "encoding/ decoding processes, etc. "Reception" has

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always been a delicate phenomenon that has been analysed and discussed by many theoreticians and critics of social sciences, experts in communication, media and cultural studies, from Hans Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss to Umberto Eco, from

Juri Lotman to Stanley Fish many well-known scholars have dwelled upon it. They all agree that all authors of books, directors of films and artists of paintings have certain audiences in their mind while creating their work. They expect a certain response, a certain attitude from their audiences, and integrate their intended message accordingly within the text they create. Art works among the different sorts of text types have a different nature and function than the so-called "informative", "operational" or "provocative" texts, which either aim to give information/teach, explain or provoke their readers. Art works have to exhibit higher aesthetic and human values that make them unique and universal, and they have to serve higher functions, such as giving their audience pleasure and happiness, inducing in them the feeling of peace, elevating them to a spiritually higher dimension, or inviting them to reflect upon certain issues that can be improved from which humanity would benefit.

A close reading of the screenscript of Ararat, from this point of view, gives the reader very clear clues about the intended readers of the film, as it screens out certain readers while appealing to certain others. Following this it can be inferred that the message is

also targetted to this particular intended audience. As it has been elaborated upon above this is an elite Western audience, comprising Christians, Jews, Armenians-especially the younger generation of them and most important of all the "decision making mechanisms" of the whole world that can be mobilized against the Turks and the Turkish government in the decisions that are waiting for to be taken for or against Turkey. Naturally other audiences that are not the "Model Readers" are also welcome who will watch the film without a critical approach and who will therefore be swept away by the scenes in the film and help popularizing the film to a larger audience by writing supportive articles and reviews without realizing their ethical responsibilities for the peace in the world.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The film directors and authors of books can naturally be inspired by the history, and especially by their own history which should be respected. However, they should be very careful before claiming that they are "reflecting the true history" in their work as this may be misleading, and can lead to hazardous effects for human relationships which the film Ararat also seems to lead. The historical facts should be researched by the historians and discussed at different platforms. In short, subjective interpretations of critical historical events should not be imposed on audiences as a one-way broadcast. This is an irresponsible attitude and is considered unethical. As the historians claim, the film is full of misconceptions, misrepresentations and one-sided interpretations of the historical events that took place in 1915-16, which may enhance the feelings of hatred in the Armenians, that

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the film indicates to exist, and also induce a reluctance in the Turks to co-operate with their fellow Armenians. Actually these two communities, the Turks and the Armenians have been living in peace together in Turkey for many years and have developed friendly relationships. This fact seems to be overlooked and underestimated by a group of Armenians, i.e. the makers of this film, who live in the diaspora and don't seem to care what their relatives think about this issue who live in

Turkey. Thus their irresponsible move may harm the existing Turco-Armenian dialogue.

The timing of the film is another important issue that has to be mentioned here. The time seems to be intentionally chosen. Ararat is filmed at a time when Europe is discussing Turkey's integration to the European Union and when Turkey has developed relatively positive relationships with the United States of America. The film aims to add new questionmarks about the Turks to the minds of the Western world in general, and to the decision making mechanisms in it in particular. It may even succeed to a certain extent in its goal, but a critical eye – and there will be many in a large audience - will easily figure out this intention, even if it is well concealed, and realize that the intended audience is being tried to be misled and betrayed with the feelings of hatred, xenophobia, racism and provocation, as well as tried to be convinced that "terrorism" is "freedom fighting". It is a great pity that such a talented film director like Atom Egoyan and his team have fallen into a fallacy and ended up with a propaganda film instead of an art work that could have contributed to the peace in the world and that could have fostered dialogue between the Armenian and Turkish communities.