

Where there is a Place, there is a Time:
How *Ararat*'s use of Time as a Narrative Construction reflects
the Present's convoluted relationship with the Past

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In order for time's healing process to take hold, one must examine the broken pieces of the past which permeate in one's present and mend those pieces with their own understanding of the very past which opened the pertinent wound. Atom Egoyan's film, *Ararat* (2002), is a grandiose yet flawed attempt at healing the scars of the past with, on a surface level, an educational examination of the Armenian Genocide and, on a more studied level, how a society removed from such an event by time and space comes to terms with it. Upon gaging how Egoyan's use of time as a narrative construction in *Ararat* is detrimental to wholeheartedly understanding those who look to the past in order to better understand their present, obsessively dwell on a past far removed at the expense of their present and deny the past in order to remove oneself from blame, one will can expect to terms with the naivety and skepticism intrinsically linked to peoples' attitudes towards a grotesque past. The social importance of *Ararat's* subject matter as a tourniquet could not be more relevant with the eve of the Armenian Genocide's 100th anniversary and the ongoing apartheid conflict between Israel and Palestine which divides its allegiances in a separation of attitudes towards the past, Egoyan himself being "suspicious of documents and artifacts that claim certainty, because, for him, there is no single "truth" that can illuminates the complexity not only of the genocide but also of the need to understand, comprehend and express calamitous, denied event". Egoyan own "truth" can be uncovered in *Ararat's* "deliberately [adopted] ruptured narrative", whose structure intends "to reveal the protagonists' identities as fragmented, framed by the complications of relationships, past present" (Frieze 246); this is a testament to cinema's value as a tool of reflexively make sense

of a divisive past both in content and form. Whether or not it surrenders to the author's own biases is for audiences to decide, but its agenda is clear and audiences must inevitably make their own sense of time's fragmented nature in *Ararat*, both as a narrative construction and an ideological deconstruction.

"[T]hose who may feel that I should have told the story more simply – should have concentrated on the film-within-the-film [which is] focused on setting the record straight. But I never saw this as my cinematic responsibility" (Egoyan 891-2) said Egoyan of his place as a scholar of the past and in regards to audience expectations of closure regarding opposing attitudes towards the Armenian Genocide. While Egoyan has failed to remove his perspective from characterization by putting an endnote to *Ararat* that reads "[t]o this day, Turkey continues to deny the Armenian Genocide of 1915" (Egoyan 2002), he has succeeded in unpretentiously reflecting his search for truth in the past genocide of his people through the character of art historian Ani and her scholarly obsession with real-life Armenian painter and genocide victim, Arshile Gorky. Mirrored with fictional director Edward Saroyan's dramatization of the Armenian Genocide and Egoyan's dramatization of Gorky's life, Ani's journey to find personal catharsis in Gorky's plight is directly at odds with her stepdaughter Celia's own confusion over her father's death. Celia blames Ani and goes as far as tearing apart one of Gorky's paintings in her frustration with Ani's deliberate ignorance towards her past, seeing her obsession with Gorky as a guise to cover a more disconcerting and personal past. Answers to Celia's disillusionment do lay in Egoyan's dramatization of Gorky's life as the nature of his mother's smudged hands in his painting, "Portrait of the

Artist and His Mother” (Gorky 1926-1936) contextualizes his suicide in 1948 as the atrocities of the past weigh heavy on his shoulders. Egoyan’s depiction of Gorky, unlike Saroyan’s biasedly theatric and hollow depiction of the Armenian Genocide, holds the answers both Ani and Celia seek since, in the unknowingness of why Gorky committed suicide, they come closer to terms with the irresolvable rift Celia father’s illusive suicide has caused by Ani almost acknowledging that she no longer intended to remain in a union with him. Past obsessions dominated Gorky’s life as they did Raffi’s, who goes to extreme lengths to simultaneously come closer to understanding and distance himself from his father, a deceased political assassin: the former by filming unauthorized footage within the vicinity of Mount Ararat and the latter by underplaying his father’s ‘legacy’ at customs. Within the realm of *Ararat*, Gorky’s, Ani’s Saroyan’s, Raffi’s and Egoyan’s work suggest “that the image serves as a “mirror” to history, offering what [Ani] calls a “sacred code” that translates the traumatic history of the destruction of [Ani’s] own and the artist’s people”. Celia “constructs an alternative code to articulate her pain by seeking to destroy [Gorky’s] “sacred” painting” (Tschofen, Burwell 5), thereby signifying the intense relationship art has to past trauma: its destruction akin to the artists’ creation of it since both are cathartic exercises. Egoyan’s ability to concurrently examine these characters’ relationship with the past as a means to resolve present woes is a stunning narrative feat further enriched by past obsessions which gnaw at the present’s quaintness.

“Ani’s first husband, Raffi’s dead father, had the most treacherous and controversial mission of “representing” the genocide for the Turkish government

[...] he was shot years earlier while attempting to assassinate a Turkish diplomat, a symbol of the Turkish government and thus a representative of its national policy of denial" (Siraganian 143). Raffi's unauthorized journey to Mount Ararat and the suspicious conditions that required him to bring a film canister of undeveloped film put him at odds with airport security officer David, whose relentless inquiry regarding Raffi's trip uncovers the self-destructive lengths to which one goes in order to find closure with a caustic past. David reviews the camcorder footage Raffi claims was commissioned for Saroyan's film, but this front is in truth a personal document shot for the sake of self-discovery. The canister, which is indeed filled with heroin, shows the depths to which one would stoop in inquisitive retreading of past waters, no matter the serious consequences it may hold for the present. "[H]ow can a violent, nation-shattering genocide be understood within the more or less conventional realm of aesthetic representation" (Siraganian 147) ponders Lisa Siraganian, an undertaking which especially endangers Raffi but is essentially explored by all the Armenian characters in the film, Egoyan included. Saroyan's perspective is perhaps the most conventional and ends up being the most graphically violent, while Egoyan's narrative structure makes "it unclear whether particular sequences belong to Saroyan's film or to Ararat" (Frieze 246). This structure directly reflects how many of these inquisitive Armenian characters feel: mentally divided between different sides of the stories, especially Raffi whose impromptu meeting with Ali, the actor impersonally playing Jevdet Bey in Saroyan's film, who he tells "do you know what Adolf Hitler told his military commanders to convince that his plan would work? "Who remembers the extermination of the

Armenians?"". It is contentiously debatable whether or not Hitler ever said this, and whether this ebbs from Raffi or Egoyan, Ali's insistence that the two "drop the fucking history and get on with it" (Egoyan 2002) is an unsettling jab at the idea that "to forget the Genocide would be to repudiate one's people and one's self" (Smith 5). Perhaps the Armenian Genocide continues to loom over the modern Armenian diaspora to the point that one is unable to genuinely identify as Armenian without personally making right their cultural history, even at the expense of the present.

"Most of the Armenian characters in the film's framing narrative are at least a generation distant from the event itself" (Siraganian 143). Ali, who is partially of Turkish descent, and his denial of the Armenian Genocide as an actor in Saroyan's film presents a telling dichotomy of a man whose attitudes are a cause of being distanced by time from a century old event but subconsciously uphold the culture of denial he claims to be distanced from. In Ali's conversation with Saroyan, Ali questions why Saroyan "never asked [him] about the history", to which Saroyan retorts "what is there to think". While this causes Ali to subtly defend the possibility of the Armenian Genocide on behalf of the Turks, this convoluted relationship between two contrasting ideologues makes its peace when David tells his homosexual son, Phillip, who is in a relationship with Ali, that he was "thinking of [Phillip]" when he decided to set Raffi free. David, who has only the present and future to look to, is not in the business of placing blame or saving face: saying Raffi ultimately couldn't believe he "could do something like [smuggling drugs]" (Egoyan 2002), therefore not condemning one's beliefs, rather accepting them and letting live. Ani recalls the death of Celia's father in an Egoyan flashback as opposed to a

Saroyan one, in which, at the brink of their relationship's end, the camera focuses on Ani as Celia's father walks away and falls to an untimely death. Ani's personal struggle in placing blame on past traumas is presented solely by Egoyan, as Raffi's is presented by his own camcorder footage, since this suicide is mirrored with Gorky's own and Ani presumably searches to make peace with an immediate tragedy by looking to art, culture and the history they have in common with Ani. Of all the characters whose lives Egoyan explores in *Ararat*, perhaps his use of time as a narrative construction best serves the story of its chief non-fictional character, Arshile Gorky. Having survived the Armenian Genocide, which is recounted in *Ararat* from many angles both fleetingly and explicitly, Gorky's plight as a man unable to make peace with the past is a mirror through which every major character in *Ararat* can see their own struggles. The illusive blurring of his mother's hands is a telling stylistic choice Egoyan loomed on for two reasons: because it is an inexplicable yet bold matter of fact that the hands are smudged, as characters such as Raffi and Ani likewise deal with matters they are genuinely clueless to the nature of, and Egoyan's theory that has Gorky holding onto his mother's hands for dear life, not wanting to let go. This emotional scene works in contextualizing Gorky's painting because whether or not Gorky feels any blame in the loss of his family at the hands of the Turks is irrelevant, rather, his wrenching urge to hold tight to his mother's hands exposes the core of Egoyan's mission as *Ararat's* author. *Ararat* is a declaration that the tangled relationship one keeps with the past is an inescapable one since, while one can break the past's hold and bury it from memory, one cannot relinquish the recurring urge to return to its wretchedness and its precious warmth.

Upon considering how Egoyan's use of time as a narrative structure in order to understand *Ararat's* cast of characters' convoluted relationships with a past they try to distance themselves from, a past they obsessive over at the expense of the present and a past with which they try to understand the present, one can come to see the virtues in *Ararat's* fractured form as this past-present cross-examination relays its inquisitive subjects towards a brighter future. *Ararat* is retread into an uncomfortable and grave past which does not, unlike Saroyan's film-within-a-film, present a subject in a manner as depraved as its subject matter. Egoyan instead produced a house of mirrors, which reflects ourselves: the past uncorrupted by the atrophy of time and how we live in its shadow. The Armenian Genocide has cast a gargantuan shadow on the Armenian diaspora and through the works of Gorky, Egoyan and any other brave Armenian artists fortitudinous enough to face the past as bravely as these men have, the heart of Armenia will shine bright in the darkness of the shadow.

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