

# "Past Not-So-Perfect": *Ararat* and Its Reception in Turkey

by ÖZLEM KÖKSAL

**Abstract:** When Atom Egoyan released his ninth feature film, *Ararat* (2002), it caused heated debates in Turkey and elsewhere as a result of its subject matter: the massacres of Ottoman Armenians between 1915 and 1918. This article looks at the problematic reception of *Ararat* in Turkey, examining not only the film itself but also the literature produced on the subject by journalists, opinion leaders, and academics. It argues that the official discourse on the Armenian genocide in Turkey also shaped discussions about the film in that country.

ANI: Your father died accidentally, he tripped and fell. . . . I didn't see him fall.

CELIA: You didn't see him fall or you don't want to think you saw him fall?

ANI: I don't remember anything but the fact that he slipped and he fell. I can't remember it the way you want me to. Even if I could remember what you want me to remember, I won't. I don't need to. Do you understand?

—*Ararat*

In 2002, Atom Egoyan released his ninth feature film, *Ararat*, provoking heated debates in Turkey and elsewhere as a result of its sensitive subject matter: the massacres of Ottoman Armenians between 1915 and 1918, now widely referred to as the Armenian genocide. In Turkey, many Turks perceived *Ararat* as a personal attack, mainly because of the dominant prevailing conviction that Armenian claims of genocide are fabricated. In a letter addressed to Egoyan upon having seen the film, a young Turkish girl complains and asks: "Mr. Egoyan, I want to ask you if this event had happened in your history and if you were accused of such a thing what would you do?"<sup>1</sup> The film obviously made a mark on this young girl: she found it inaccurate but also personally upsetting. This young woman's reaction on its own could have been insignificant, one among many. However, as I discuss here, it was representative of the general reaction to the film in Turkey, which cannot be

1 Atom Egoyan, "In Other Words: Poetic Licence and the Incarnation of History," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2004): 897.

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seen as merely disagreeing with the film's, or Egoyan's, approach to the subject. Within the context of Turkey such a reaction illustrates the result of the ongoing dominant discourse on the subject, which is a denialist one. The Turkish authorities have denied many of the claims about the genocide—or the “alleged Armenian genocide,” as it would be called in Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

This article looks at the problematic reception of the film in Turkey and the turmoil it created, discussing not only the film itself but also the literature produced on the subject by journalists, opinion leaders, and academics. *Ararat*, in Turkey, was received on a canvas that was already painted with Turkish nationalism, which is informed by the official discourse on the Armenian genocide. This is to say that the hegemonic nationalist discourse in the country was very much at work and visible in the reception of the film. In Turkey, one of main concerns of the film, (not) listening to the other, became its own fate. This was enabled by two factors. First, most analyses of the film in Turkey were produced before anyone had a chance to see the film. In other words, the film's “reception” was formed before the film was “received.” The second important factor was that the analyses of *Ararat* in Turkey were limited to a number of controversial scenes taken out of context, making it easier for such nationalistic discourses to be produced about the film. Hence the film's reception in Turkey was a complex event, interwoven with, and shaped by, the existing discussions on—and the continuous denial of—the Armenian genocide, which is maintained by the categorical refusal to hear what the other, in this case, the Armenian, has to say regarding his or her suffering.

The film provoked reactions in many different spheres of public life. The Turkish authorities felt obliged to condemn the film, and there was discussion of whether or not to allow the film to be screened in Turkey. Permission was, in the end, granted, but Belge Film, the company that bought the rights, decided not to screen it since radical nationalist groups “warned” the public that they would “take action” and do whatever was necessary to stop the film being shown.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to explain their decision to withdraw the film, Sabahattin Çetin, the owner of Belge Film, said that although they were assured that necessary security measures would be taken in theaters, it was simply not acceptable to screen the film with heavy police presence and with an audience

2 Armenian genocide refers to the deportations and massacres of the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. When the Ottoman Empire allied with Germany during World War I, Armenian revolutionaries saw a chance to form an independent nation-state by allying with Russia. The governing party, Committee of Union and Progress, wanted to “solve” the Armenian question, and a secret branch within the party, *Teskilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization), planned the deportations of Armenians between 1915 and 1918, according to many scholars, with the intention of clearing Anatolia of Armenians. Many died during these long marches as a result of starvation and illnesses, which later formed part of the accusations against the authorities, claiming that they intentionally did nothing to protect the people. There are also eyewitness accounts claiming to have seen soldiers massacring and torturing Armenians, to which the authorities also turned a blind eye. For more information on the history of the Armenian genocide, see Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Constable, 2007); Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göcek, and Norman M. Naimark, eds., *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3 In a press release, Alişan Satılmış, the president of the youth wing (Ülkü Ocakları) of the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), stated, “Those who show the courage to screen the film should also remember that there is a price to pay for such hostility against Turks.” Alişan Satılmış, “*Ararat*'i Cesaretiniz Varsa Yayınlayın,” January 1, 2004, <http://www.bozkurt.net/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=1905>.

in fear of an attack.<sup>4</sup> The film was screened on a national television channel (Kanal Türk) four years after its initial release under the pretext of informing the public, arguing that the defense strategies could not be successful unless what is being faced is known. The general conviction was that to ban *Ararat* would not solve the problem, the “problem” being conceived as the film’s attitude toward history, rather than Turkey’s attitude.

This problematic relation to the film had more to do with the way the subject matter (i.e., the Armenian genocide) is perceived in Turkey and less with how *Ararat* deals with it. In fact, to maintain such a problematic relation to the film is possible only by resisting the film’s own handling of its subject. With its complicated narration, *Ararat* tells a complicated story, one that cannot be reduced to “attacking Turks.” Indeed, the film’s reception in Turkey was itself an example of the lack of trust on which the film itself comments. Even before anyone had seen the film, it was generally assumed that if an Armenian made a movie about massacres of Armenians, he or she would, first, represent Turks as less than human; second, provoke hatred; and, finally, be financed by the Armenian lobby.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the criticism of, as well as the reaction to, the film in Turkey was based largely on the film of *Ararat*’s fictional director Edward Saroyan (the film-within-the-film), taking it out of its context and treating it as the kernel in which the essence of the film is to be found. Such an approach either ignored the rest of *Ararat*, which focused on the daily encounters of the characters, or accused Egoyan of trying to veil his “real” intention, that of degrading Turks by putting the blame on Saroyan.

In what follows, I first briefly introduce *Ararat* and some of its most salient themes, paying attention to the way it deals with the legacy of the Armenian genocide. The second part examines the reception of the film in Turkey, looking at newspaper articles and scholarly work written about the film.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the last section outlines the key issues at the heart of the film, exploring some of the scenes that were overlooked in many of the critiques in Turkey but that are important in understanding the film’s position. The main argument in each section is not that the film’s reception was “wrong,” but that it was not received in its entirety. That is to say, the film was initially received as an idea prior to its release; then, once released, its reception was based on selected scenes that fit the existing discourse on the subject. In the process, the contrast the film seeks to create disappeared, as did the questions it poses about history and memory. In that very disappearance, however, something else came to the fore: namely, the theme of haunting and the figure of the ghost through which the film deals with the memory of the event. In other words, the ways in which the film and its subject haunt its audiences are one of the determining factors of its particular reception. If “to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories,” as Avery Gordon

4 “Ararat’ın Gösterimi İptal Edildi,” *Milliyet*, January 9, 2004, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2004/01/09/guncel/gun01.html>.

5 In Turkey, within the dominant discourse on the subject of Armenian genocide, the phrase “Armenian lobby” is used to refer to the Armenian diaspora and the presumed propaganda activities by this group that is imagined to be a homogeneous entity.

6 The newspaper articles looked at here are from four of the best-selling broadsheets in Turkey: *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Sabah*, and *Radikal*. All translations from Turkish to English are mine unless otherwise noted.

claims, then *Ararat* is a ghost story.<sup>7</sup> However, its use of history, its narrative structure, and particularly the embodiment of the absence of history in the figure of (ghostly) Arshile Gorky make *Ararat* not only a haunted narrative but also one that haunts.

**Locating *Ararat*.** *Ararat* is a particularly difficult film to summarize. It deals with the events of 1915 from an unusual perspective: rather than producing a direct representation of the event, it focuses on the representations of it.<sup>8</sup> The film consists of two major parts. The film-within-the-film is directed by the fictional director Edward Saroyan (Charles Aznavour) and takes place in Van in 1915. Saroyan is a filmmaker of Armenian descent and is in Toronto to shoot a film about the Armenian uprising against the Ottoman army in the city of Van in 1915, based on his mother's memories as well as a book written by Clarence Ussher (played by Bruce Greenwood).<sup>9</sup> *Ararat* itself, while chronicling the production process of Saroyan's film, focuses on the daily encounters and personal dilemmas of the characters, who are involved in the making of the film-within-the-film. This second section of the film also forms the "present" of the narrative. However, it is a difficult task to determine the exact diegetic present of the film, given its complicated narrative structure and its treatment of time as it moves back and forth between events, until it becomes difficult for the audience to determine what happened when and which event led to what.

Egoyan explains his decision to create a complicated narrative structure as the result of the nature of the issues he dealt with in *Ararat*. According to the director, "This was the only way the story could be told. It is dense and complex because the issues are so dense and complex."<sup>10</sup> Hence, the film "uses every possible tense and mood available to tell its story, from the basic pillars of the past, present, and the future, to the subjective, the past-perfect, and past not-so-perfect, and the past-would-be-perfect-if-it-weren't-so-conditional."<sup>11</sup> This, in return, allows the film to go beyond the ethically problematic discourse of evidence or proof and proposes a new discourse, one that seeks for acknowledgment of the rupture created by (the denial of) history, by not listening to the other. In doing so, Egoyan insists on the "now" of the event, which is not merely a narrative device but also has an immediate connection to the "now" of the film: the continuous refusal to hear anything that does not reproduce the official discourse on the subject in Turkey. The film, in return, looks for a shape that is absent:

7 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17.

8 My analysis in this article is primarily concerned with the film's reception in Turkey, and therefore I do not cover the large literature written on *Ararat*. However, there are many articles and book chapters available in English. In 2004 *Armenian Review* published a special issue on *Ararat* in which the film is discussed from different viewpoints; see *Armenian Review* 49, nos. 1–4 (2004–2005). See also Jonathan Romney, *Atom Egoyan* (London: BFI, 2003), 171–187; Emma Wilson, *Atom Egoyan* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 115–128; Lisa Siraganian, "Telling a Horror Story, Conscientiously: Representing the Armenian Genocide from Open House to *Ararat*," in *Image and Territory: Essays on Atom Egoyan*, ed. Monique Tschofen and Jenifer Burwell (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 133–156.

9 Clarence Ussher was an American physician in Turkey at the time; his book is *An American Physician in Turkey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917).

10 Egoyan, "In Other Words," 902.

11 *Ibid.*, 901–902.

absence of memory, absence of recognition, and finally the absence of the very people whose history it wants to capture.

At the center of the story is Raffi (David Alpay) and his relationship to the past, particularly to his father, who was killed while trying to assassinate a Turkish diplomat. Raffi's mother, Ani (Arshine Kanjian), is an art historian who has written a book on the prominent real-life Armenian painter Arshile Gorky (played by Simon Abkarian). Having heard Ani's lecture about Gorky, Saroyan asks Ani to act as a consultant for the film he is making. It is through his mother that Raffi also starts working at the set of the film. Raffi's girlfriend Celia (Marie-Josée Croze), in contrast, is the daughter of Ani's second husband, who is seeking the truth about her father's death and some form of acknowledgment from Ani with regard to her role in the incident that killed him. The only Turkish character in the film is Ali (Elias Koteas), an aspiring actor who plays Cevdet Bey (governor of Van at the time of the massacre) in Saroyan's film. Finally, David (Christopher Plummer), whose encounter with Raffi toward the end holds an important place in the narrative, works as a customs official at the Toronto airport and is the father of Ali's partner Philip. David performs a number of functions in the film, one of which is the representation of "door keeper," not only because of his job—deciding who and what enters the country—but also because of his encounter with Raffi, which will be discussed further below.

What connects these characters, aside from having direct or indirect involvement with Saroyan's film, is that they either suffer from some sort of denial (of truth, of acknowledgment) or live in denial themselves, and in some cases both at the same time. This denial is maintained by refusing to face the *entire* truth, rejecting the opportunity to hear the other and, most important of all, refusing to face the past as well as the resonances of the past in the present.

The title of the film comes from Mount Ararat, an important symbolic site in Armenian culture, which lies today within the borders of Turkey.<sup>12</sup> Hence, in addition to naming his film, and the film-within-the-film, after the mountain, Egoyan also opens the film with an image of Ararat. The significance of Mount Ararat for Armenians also manifests itself in the film-within-the-film when Saroyan decides to have the image of the mountain visible from Van, which in reality it is not. When challenged by Ani, Saroyan cites "poetic license" and that it is true "in spirit." The scene locates Saroyan's anxiety around the image of Ararat as he dislocates the mountain: the issue here is not geographical but temporal, about what is needed today rather than what exactly happened in the past. This, in turn, determines how Egoyan deals with the issue of time in the film as it moves freely between different temporalities.

The first image of *Ararat*, after that image of the mountain, is the photograph of Arshile Gorky and his mother (Figure 1). The film opens with the camera gazing across the artifacts and other materials in Gorky's studio, including the sketch and the finished version of his famous painting *Artist and His Mother* (1926) (Figure 2). The scene is also the first one of several that depicts Gorky in his studio in the 1920s, creating an ambiguous relation between these sequences and the rest of the film. The camera

12 In addition to being the home of the gods in Armenian mythology, Mount Ararat also serves as the symbol of the Republic of Armenia.



Figure 1. Photograph of Gorky and his mother in Van (photographer unknown, 1912).



Figure 2. *Artist and His Mother*, by Arshile Gorky (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

him to die the way he did. Raffi's father was killed while he was trying to assassinate a Turkish diplomat in an attempt to raise awareness about the Armenian genocide, which, without explicitly naming them, hints at the Armenian Secret Army for the

then moves across the room to stop, momentarily, on the painter himself looking outside the window before dissolving into another image, into a different temporality: first to appear are silhouettes of people at the airport, then a pensive Saroyan among them. With this scene, Sylvia Rollet suggests, the ghosts of history that connect and haunt these two men also haunt the filmic space: "Although these fugitive silhouettes assume, after several long seconds, the form of harmless travellers, they nevertheless inscribe the phantoms of Saroyan's and Gorky's shared history on the surface of the filmic signifier."<sup>13</sup> However, the ghosts of history haunt not only the image but also the soundtrack in this sequence, albeit much more discreetly: as the image slowly dissolves into people walking at the airport, the sound also dissolves. What seems, at first, to be the sound of people walking at the airport reveals itself to be two superimposed sounds, the sound of people walking accompanied by horses dissolving into the noises of the airport: the displacement connecting the two men is revealed subtly with the sound bridge that also connects the two images. While the forced marches of Armenians accompanied by soldiers on horses marks Gorky's past, a ruptured sense of space and time marks Saroyan's.

A similar sense of rupture shapes Raffi's identity as he searches for "some kind of explanation" as to what happened to his father. Although—unlike Celia's father—there is no question as to how he died, what haunts Raffi is the reason he followed the path he did, which caused

13 Sylvia Rollet, "Discontinuous Transmission," *Armenian Review* 49, nos. 1–4 (2004–2005): 68.



Figure 3. Raffi (David Alpay) illustrating his story to David (Christopher Plummer) with the video recording he captured in Van (Miramax, 2002).

Liberation of Armenia's (ASALA) activities in the 1980s, which I discuss herein. Raffi, in his struggle to comprehend his father's death, constantly moves back and forth between his father being a "freedom fighter" and a "terrorist." Taking Celia's advice ("You look after your ghost, I look after mine"), he decides to go to Turkey, to the city of Van, the land of his ancestors and the city where the siege in the film-within-the-film takes place. This is the journey that will also lead to his troubles at the customs office on his way back to Canada, where he is stopped by the customs officer, David, on suspicion of drug smuggling. David and Raffi engage in a very long conversation and tiresome interrogation into what Raffi has brought from Turkey in the film cans, which, Raffi insists, contain unexposed film that would be ruined if exposed to daylight. This long conversation, during which David listens to Raffi's reasons for going to Turkey, is practically unnecessary for obtaining the information David is after (i.e., whether or not Raffi is smuggling illegal substances into Canada) but functions to highlight the impossibility of exposing the truth Raffi is searching for. In an effort to explain himself, Raffi starts talking about his ancestors, the denial of the suffering they were subjected to, as well as his father, illustrating his points with the video recordings he has captured in Van, in which "there is nothing but ruins" (Figure 3). The images, visible to the spectator as well as to David, serve neither to prove nor to disprove his story, but they point to a mark left by absence. Raffi's need to be heard comes before, and goes beyond, his need to make a statement on the subject.<sup>14</sup>

14 According to Marc Nichanian, the scene represents a symbolic encounter between the law and belief, as well as Armenian history's forcing its entry into the civilized world. As the airport serves as the gate of the civilized world and David as the guardian of that gate, Nichanian argues that the encounter is "exactly like in Kafka's brief text 'Before the Law,' [Raffi] encounters the guardian of the law, the civilized world. . . . Egoyan, for the first time ever, organizes an encounter with the civilized world" (152), and it is during this encounter that the relation between truth and testimony is challenged. Marc Nichanian, "Representation and Historicity," *Armenian Review* 49, nos. 1-4 (2004-2005), 152-155.

The film uses each character to “speak” an aspect of the suffering and, subsequently, an aspect of this unrecognized history, as well as its intergenerational effects. The complexity of the situation, the impossibility of representing the very suffering that is driving the characters’ actions as well as the narrative, is presented not through a narrative that assumes a mastery over history but through the admission and addressing of the problems of representation. *Ararat* puts the need, the necessity for recognition, at its center, registering unrecognized pain as an ever-blasting bomb that never ceases to destroy. This becomes particularly visible in Celia’s rage as she attempts to destroy Gorky’s painting. Herself not an Armenian, her unrecognized pain resonates with the audience, reminding them that it is the denial, rather than the initial event, that causes the most suffering in the present. Her lacerated being drives her to lacerate a painting that has come to embody, in Ani’s words, an intergenerational pain. How this denial relates to the present day, and in which ways it manifests itself, is revealed in the reception of the film in Turkey.

**Discourse on the Armenian Genocide and the Reception of *Ararat* in Turkey.** The dominant discourse on the Armenian genocide in Turkey, which is formed around denying accountability and avoiding the subject when possible, also shaped the film’s reception. Many critics apply the selective approach to history that Fatma Müge Göcek identifies as the “Republican defensive narrative” when discussing historiography about Ottoman Armenians in Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

According to Göcek, historiography on Armenians in Turkey can be viewed in three historical periods according to the different purposes they serve and in line with the political climate from which they emerge: Ottoman investigative narrative, Republican defensive narrative, and postnationalist critical narrative.<sup>16</sup> The Ottoman investigative narrative covers the period of the events and their immediate aftermath. The most salient aspect of these works, such as memoirs and reports, is that they do not question the occurrence of the massacres.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, there is a period of silence until 1953, and then another twenty years of silence until 1973. That is to say, although the silence on the matter was broken temporarily in the 1950s with a few works disseminating the Republican defensive narrative, most of these works were published during and after the 1970s. The Republican defensive narrative is dominated, in tone, by Turkish nationalism and blames Western forces and Armenian revolutionaries for the loss of Armenian lives, disclaiming all responsibility on the part of the Turkish authorities. Göcek connects the emergence and popularity of works that disseminate the Republican defensive narrative to the political climate in Turkey: the nationalist narratives concerning the events of 1915 were written predominantly during the 1970s, the period in which ASALA emerged and carried out a number of attacks on Turkish embassies abroad—and an airport in Turkey—killing and wounding many civilians.

15 Fatma Müge Göcek, “Reconstructing the Turkish Historiography on the Armenian Massacres and Deaths of 1915,” in *Confronting the Armenian Genocide: Looking Backward, Moving Forward*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 218–223.

16 *Ibid.*, 210–211.

17 *Ibid.*, 211.

Their aim was to create awareness and recognition of the Armenian genocide, but in Turkey it created a counterresponse. According to Göcek, “the defensive Republican narrative became even more polarized during this period as it drew selectively on Ottoman documents and the works of early Republican writers to maintain its ascendance down to the present.”<sup>18</sup> The most recent approach to the historiography of Ottoman Armenians, a postnationalist critical narrative, emerged in the early 1990s with the lessening of military influence over politics and intensifying talk of accession to the European Union. According to Göcek, postnationalist critical narratives are “products of emerging civil society in contemporary Turkey.”<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, within the last decade, discussions concerning the Armenian question have begun to force themselves into the Turkish public sphere. Recently, although not to everyone’s satisfaction and not with sufficient substance to change the official discourse, the issue has started to be discussed more widely. However, this does not mean that a new discourse has replaced its predecessor. Rather, they both exist simultaneously: as the postnationalist discourse encourages open debate about history, the Republican defensive narrative maintains its dominance and continues to produce counterarguments.

Hence, on the surface two things appear to help shape and maintain the dominant discourse on the subject in Turkey: the narrative on how Armenians collaborated with the imperial powers during World War I and the later attacks carried out by ASALA. As a result, Armenian claims of genocide are perceived as the source of a number of problems, which, in Turkey, are often referred to collectively as the “Armenian problem.” However, according to Taner Akçam, the real problem in relation to Armenians and ASALA was not the constantly repeated argument that Armenians had cooperated with imperialist powers:

The real problem was that the subject referred as the “Armenian Problem” occupied such a perverse place in [the Turkish] mind. The subject was so foreign to our way of thinking and the way we viewed the world (our *Weltanschauung*) that to approach it seriously meant risking all the concepts or models we had used to explain our world and ourselves. Our entrenched belief systems constituted an obstacle to understanding the subject.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the desire to maintain the concepts that help explain our world to ourselves often leads to the distortion of both the reality and the definition of the problem itself. Akçam refers to this as the “fear of confronting” the issue, hence the reason the subject occupies a perverse place in the Turkish mind.<sup>21</sup>

This fear also shaped the discussions of the film in Turkey. As the analysis here will illustrate, according to the mainstream media, which often repeats the official discourse on the subject, Turks do not have any problem with Armenians, and the problem itself is created by these accusations—hence, by Armenians. What Gündüz

18 Ibid., 221.

19 Ibid., 225.

20 Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Zed Books, 2004), ix.

21 Ibid.

Aktan asserts in his article in the *Hürriyet Daily News* is a case in point. According to Aktan, “Contrary to the claims of the movie *Ararat*, the Turks never hated Armenians.”<sup>22</sup> Aktan’s article was written before the film premiered—hence, before anyone had had a chance to see it. The defensive rhetoric, outlined by Göcek, is embedded even in this short sentence, as it reveals the assumption that there is, or will be, an “attack” on the Turks simply because the film deals with a particularly horrific moment in the history of Armenians in Anatolia.

Aktan’s strong statement about a film he has not seen reveals an important aspect of the film’s Turkish reception. As stated already, what is referred to as the “reception” throughout this article includes not only responses to the film but also reactions to the idea of the film prior to its release. This is because the discussions about the film in Turkey started months before it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002, as *Ararat* was already making the news during its production and postproduction phases. Columnists in Turkey penned many opinion pieces before they had had a chance to see the film.

From the second half of 2001, when the news that *Ararat* was in production began disseminating, until May 2002, when *Ararat* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, dozens of news pieces and opinion articles were written about the film in Turkey, all without seeing the film. Hence, this “pre-reception” phase is crucial to consider, not only because it reveals the speculative and reactionary nature of these articles but also because it worked to establish the context in which the actual reception was to take place. In addition to many newspaper articles written prior to the film’s release, a reactionary campaign was organized to mobilize the Turkish public to voice their opinion against the film by sending letters to Miramax (the American distributor of the film, not the production company, as Miramax was referred to by many in Turkey). The letter urged the company “to carry out proper research on the subject using Ottoman archives” and “not to provoke two nations [Armenia and Turkey] against each other.” It ended with a warning that, if Miramax decided to go ahead with the project, it would become necessary for Turkish filmgoers to boycott the company.<sup>23</sup> The nature and the intensity of the discussions about the film were also, to a large extent, responsible for Egoyan’s decision to screen the film outside the competition at the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>24</sup>

Most of these articles are also examples of the Republican defensive narrative, which still dominates discourse in Turkey. In February 2002 Doğan Uluç, referring to the film, wrote that “it seems that some Armenian groups, blinded by hatred, will

22 Gündüz Aktan, “Why Cannot It Be?,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 9, 2002, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/h.php?news=why-can-not-it-be-2002-01-09>. Aktan is a former diplomat who is also known for his engagement with the subject. As well as his writings on the Armenian issue (most of which are in line the Republican defensive narrative, per Göcek), he was the former president of Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies). See also note 31 below.

23 “Ararat Savaşı,” *Milliyet*, February 27, 2002, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2002/02/27/dunya/adun.html>.

24 Egoyan, it is reported, did not want to screen his film as part of the competition “in order to assuage the intense controversy it was expected to arouse”; “Ararat,” *Canadian Film Encyclopaedia*, <http://tiff.net/CANADIANFILMEN CYCLOPEDIA/content/films/ararat>. However, in Turkey it was reported that the film was rejected as part of the competition by the festival committee itself. “Ararat Cannes Film Festivalinde Yarışma Dışı Bırakıldı,” *Zaman*, April 25, 2002, <http://arsiv.zaman.com.tr/2002/04/25/kultur/butun.htm>.

not give up trying to deceive the world with their lies and forged documents.”<sup>25</sup> This rhetoric of “invoking hatred amongst two nations” and perceiving the film as part of a larger campaign against Turkey is continual throughout the film’s media coverage. While Tufan Türeñç wrote that the film “aimed at creating enemies out of two nations,” Mehmet Ali Kışlalı argued that it was absolutely necessary that Turks see the film because it was a prime example of “how Armenians still see us [the Turks] and how they want to portray us to the world.”<sup>26</sup> Kışlalı concluded that to understand the campaign against the Turks in the world, Turks must see the film and educate themselves with regard to this rising danger.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, and in line with the rhetoric of neoliberal nationalism, *Milliyet* columnist Melih Aşık argued that *Ararat* was another case of *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978) and suggested that official bodies and non-governmental organizations act “now” rather than later, as the film was still in the process of being made.<sup>28</sup> Aşık recommended that the producers be reminded that Turkey offers a large market for their business and, therefore, that anything “that might hurt Turkey” should be removed from the film.<sup>29</sup>

The majority of the articles and news pieces about *Ararat* share the supposition that “there is a campaign against Turks and Turkey” and that the Turks are not able to deal effectively with the claims. According to Hasan Pulur, for instance, “it would be a mistake to assume, by looking at the reaction [to the film], that we [the Turks] are attached to our past, to our history and to our values; that is not the case.” For Pulur it is precisely because of the existing ignorance about history that “they” (Armenians) are able to turn it against “us” (the Turks).<sup>30</sup>

Another common element shared by many articles written on the film in Turkey is how they deal with the past. Best described as disavowal, these articles bring past and present narratives together to suit their purposes. In the process, discrepancies in their narrative become irrelevant or unimportant. Writing for the newspaper *Sabah*, Erdal Şafak displays a very revealing example. He begins his article with an anecdote, which was apparently kept a secret for a long time. A French Armenian professor comes to Turkey with a friend to visit the village his parents originally came from. Upon arrival, they meet the village’s imam, and after a lengthy conversation, it is revealed that the

25 Doğan Uluç, “Ararat’a Karşı Büyük Hile,” *Hürriyet*, February 24, 2002, <http://webarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/2002/02/24/92781.asp>.

26 Tufan Türeñç, “Aynı Yanlışı Ararat İçin de Yapmayalım,” *Hürriyet*, December, 29, 2001, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=45358>; Mehmet Ali Kışlalı, “Ararat Seyredilmeli,” *Radikal*, March 7, 2002, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=31207>.

27 Kışlalı, “Ararat Seyredilmeli.”

28 Writing on Turkish nationalism, Tanıl Bora argues that from the 1990s on, two dynamics were at play in the shaping of Turkish nationalism in a rapidly globalizing world: “reactionary nationalistic movements,” which use the “theme of national survival,” and “pro-Western nationalistic movements.” Influenced by these two dynamics, Bora defines five main nationalist languages in Turkey: official nationalism (Atatürk nationalism), Kemalist nationalism (Uluşçuluk), liberal nationalism, Turkish radical nationalism, and the recently rising Islamist nationalism. However, rather than being mutually exclusive, these five categories are interfused, “which ultimately reinforces the hegemony of nationalism.” See Tanıl Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, nos. 2–3 (2003): 436.

29 Melih Aşık, “Ararat Yolda,” *Milliyet*, June 23, 2001, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2001/06/23/yazar/asik.html>.

30 Hasan Pulur, “Ararat Filmi ve Şehit Tıbbiyeliler,” *Milliyet*, May 24, 2002, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2002/05/24/yazar/pulur.html>.

imam is in fact the professor's brother: "It turns out that they are part of the same family scattered around by the storm [*kasırga*] in the 1900s. While half of the family left, the other half stayed behind and converted to Islam."<sup>31</sup> The imam asks his brother to leave before anyone finds out, as he fears the community will not respect him as a religious leader if they discover that he is in fact a convert [*dönme*], which is also the reason the story is kept a secret for a long time. Şafak writes this article in relation to *Ararat*'s withdrawal from theaters as a result of the radical nationalist threats, asking for a calmer response. However, what begins as an article suggesting a less reactionary and more compassionate approach to the subject—and therefore to the film—concludes that the Turks are not "helpless against [genocide] claims" and "are confident and believe that [their] hands are clean."<sup>32</sup> What is noteworthy in this article, and in many others, is the inconsistency latent in its description of the past and the present. Şafak refers to the event as a "storm." Despite his hesitant acknowledgment that "something" happened, he suddenly comes to the conclusion that "our hands are clean," which suggests that the word *storm* was not a metaphor for the catastrophic event that befell Armenians but a term referring to an event that affected everyone, including Armenians, as a natural disaster would.

Şafak's article exemplifies a common understanding of the "problem" in Turkey: not the fact that a historical event still awaits recognition, but that people (Armenians, the West, the world) blame Turkey with unacceptable accusations. As Eser Köker and Ülkü Doğanay point out in their report on hate speech in the print media, the way the problem is defined in the media shows that the

politics of deadlock, which includes the misrecognition of the problem, and the emotional tone that lies behind it, is recruited by media professionals. Just as the way in which the problem is identified involves diverting the focus based on creating false enemies, the solution is also based on ignoring [the real problem] and creating pseudo solutions that are generated by denial strategies.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the position adopted by the mainstream media ("we have no problem with Armenians") assumes that history's sheet is clean. As such, the problem comes to be defined as Armenian demands for recognition for something that did not happen rather than Turkey's unwillingness to consider or investigate what really happened. Such definitions of the problem also shaped reactions to the film in Turkey, in which the film was perceived as part of the problem rather than an articulation of it. The predominant view in Turkey today sees the events as unfortunate but refuses accountability, rejecting specifically the accusations regarding genocidal intent, the intention to clear Anatolia of Armenians. Therefore, the word *genocide* is taboo in Turkey when used in relation to Armenians.

31 Erdal Şafak, "Ararat Kavgası," *Sabah*, January 11, 2004, <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2004/01/11/yaz08-10-110-20040105.html>.

32 Ibid.

33 Eser Köker and Ülkü Doğanay, *İrkçi Değişim Ama: Yazılı Basında İrkçi-Ayrımcı Söylemler* (Ankara: IHOP Yayınları, 2011), 102.

Such reactionary approaches to the film were not limited to newspaper articles but also shaped the tone of the two books written on the subject by academics. The first book was written by Sedat Laçiner and Şenol Kantarcı, both of whom admittedly had not seen the film at the time and wrote the book on the basis of the shooting script.<sup>34</sup> In line with the dominant discourse on the subject, and with the aim of discrediting the film, Laçiner and Kantarcı claim that *Ararat* received funding from various Armenian organizations and was made as a propaganda film. Inadvertently constructing a prime example of the defensive narrative and using key words of the liberal nationalist discourse (e.g., market economy, relations with the West), the authors argue that the film campaigns against the Turks and not only would cause problems between the two nations but also would damage Turkey's image in the West. They further question Egoyan's credibility as a director by examining his personal life prior to the film and suggesting that he is a "radical nationalist" with a certain agenda.<sup>35</sup>

The book includes the section "Scenes Depicting Turks as Barbaric." According to the authors, the film as a whole depicts the Turks as people "who are only capable of evil."<sup>36</sup> However, their entire argument is based on scenes from Saroyan's film-within-a-film, which they attribute directly to Egoyan and his intention to depict Turks as inhuman.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Egoyan is also the creator of the film-within-the-film, but his decision to present those scenes in contrast to the rest of the film cannot be disregarded in any critical engagement. Egoyan's decision to position Saroyan as a character, and his film as film-within-the film, rather than simply making the film Saroyan makes, is deliberate and crucial. The film-within-the-film allows Egoyan to create a space to compare different representations of the past and to comment on his own role as filmmaker as well as on the process of representation. Nevertheless, as I argue, the aim of the authors was not to engage critically with the film and therefore perhaps to confront the ghosts of the past but to discredit it, to chase away the ghosts, albeit temporarily.

The second book published in Turkey that treats *Ararat* as propaganda was written by another academic, Birsen Karaca, and called *The Alleged Armenian Genocide Project: Social Memory and Cinema*.<sup>38</sup> In addition to *Ararat*, Karaca also looks at Henri Verneuil's *Mayrig (Mother)* (1991) and Sarky Moudrian's *Sons of Sasoun* (1975), all of which contain some reference to the history of Ottoman Armenians. Karaca, who was writing the book four years after *Ararat*'s release and hence had seen the film, argues that all three films are aimed at disseminating a manipulated and one-sided story of the historical

34 The book was published by the research center Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi-Ermeni Arastırmaları Enstitüsü (Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies, Institute for Armenian Research, or ASAM-ERAREN). Taner Akçam describes ASAM as the propaganda center of the Turkish government for disseminating the official ideology of the state on the Armenian problem. ASAM changed its name in 2005 to Center for Research on Crimes against Humanity. See Taner Akçam, *Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmustur: Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), 168. According to Egoyan the shooting script was not publicly available at the time the book was written but "somehow found its way to Turkey." See Egoyan, "In Other Words," 898.

35 In addition to the general tone of the book that argues for Egoyan's nationalist views, the authors also explicitly state that Egoyan was "radicalized" during and after his university years, particularly after meeting his wife, Arsine Khanjian. See Sedat Laçiner and Senol Kantarcı, *Ararat: Sanatsal Ermeni Propagandası* (Ankara: ASAM, 2002), 51.

36 Ibid., 62.

37 Ibid., 65.

38 Birsen Karaca, *Sözde Ermeni Soykırımı Projesi: Toplumsal Bellek ve Sinema* (Istanbul: Say, 2006).

events, with an agenda to degrade Turks. Much harsher in tone, the book reproduces the Kemalist nationalist discourse: conspiring against the West (particularly Europe) and Armenians.<sup>39</sup> The author tries to prove that these films are part of a larger agenda intended to damage Turkey's credibility.<sup>40</sup> According to Karaca, Verneuil's *Mayrig* openly supports the Armenian terror, and Moudrian's *Sons of Sasoun* makes a legend of it. Her analysis of *Ararat* is also highly problematic; she describes the film as a "documentary on drug smuggling" and provides an unconvincing reading of the film to illustrate her argument.<sup>41</sup> In addition to this conviction, the author also believes the film is decidedly hostile toward Turks and interested in "creating the worst possible image of Turks for the audiences."<sup>42</sup>

The representation of Turks in the film was indeed the focus of many responses to *Ararat*. The only Turkish character in the film, in addition to the vulgar soldiers in Saroyan's film whom we do not get to know, is the half-Turkish, half-Canadian Ali. His character is important not only because he is the only Turkish character (albeit half) but also because the exchange between him and Raffi holds a significant place in the narrative. Ali's brief conversation with Saroyan, during which he wants to talk about what he thinks happened to Armenians, disappoints him, as Saroyan simply dismisses his ideas. Raffi, however, expresses his disappointment that Saroyan lets Ali go unchallenged. Raffi then, influenced by Ali's moving performance as Cevdet Bey, asks him about this particular incident with Saroyan. During their conversation Ali repeats the dominant Turkish view on the subject: "It was during the First World War. People get moved around all the time." Although he does not mean to "deny" but desires to "move on," his answer is, for Raffi, a simple repetition of the denialist rhetoric, which leaves him upset and angry. However, Ali's character does not simply deliver these lines to be vilified in the film. On the contrary, Ali himself has to deal with discrimination, particularly from his partner Philip's father, David. Despite his firsthand experience of not being recognized, he fails to understand the rupture in Raffi's sense of self.<sup>43</sup>

In a lengthy journal article, Turkish film scholar Asli Daldal offers a reading of Ali's portrayal as a Muslim gay man and speculates on Egoyan's intentions for doing so.<sup>44</sup> According to Daldal, "While attempting to present the truth, *Ararat* creates its own

39 According to Tanil Bora, Kemalist nationalism is characterized by the motifs of anti-imperialism, secularism, and anti-Westernism. It "exhibits a stance that is racist, disparaging, and Orientalist" toward certain groups such as Arabs, and toward ethnic minorities, including Kurds and Armenians. Please also see note 28 *infra*. Bora, "Nationalist Discourses," 439–440.

40 The author is so determined to prove her point that she goes as far as claiming that ASALA was still active even in 2004 and killed five Turkish officers in Iraq. *Ibid.*, 30. However the organization ceased to be active in the late 1980s.

41 *Ibid.*, 70–115. Karaca does not provide any rationale for her analysis to prove that the film is about drug smuggling more than anything else. It is unclear how this conviction ties into her general argument, that the film is a propaganda film that is hostile toward Turks.

42 *Ibid.*, 71, 78.

43 As I discuss later, Ali is not the only character in the film who fails to "listen." Ani, who dedicated her life to raising awareness on Armenian genocide, fails to hear Celia's pain even though she is the only person who can provide closure to the issue of Celia's father's suicide.

44 Unlike the two books mentioned here, Daldal's article was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal and provides a comprehensive and balanced discussion of the film. See Asli Daldal, "Ararat and the Politics of 'Preserving' Denial," *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 5 (2007): 407–434.

‘official history,’ which is presented as the history,” and “the audience is not asked to think about or evaluate the claims of the film, but persuaded in a sense to accept what is presented as absolutely factual.”<sup>45</sup> Daldal argues that Ali is portrayed as the other, first as homosexual, second as Muslim, which reflects not only the discrimination that exists in society but also Egoyan’s own manipulative attempt to single out the character. Daldal writes:

The figure of the Oriental male or female as a gay seducer is a well-known cliché; indeed, the harem and the Turkish bath are the two most popular representations of Ottoman Turkey. . . . Despite the western image of Turkey (especially Istanbul) as the site of a multitude of sexual fantasies, homosexuality is still largely condemned in contemporary Turkey, and Turkish audiences always react when a Turkish character is presented as gay in a foreign movie (as is often the case, especially in anti-Turkish films such as *Midnight Express*). As Ali is the only thoroughly gay character in the film (Philip previously led a “normal” heterosexual life), his depiction as an isolated man (without any apparent family around him) is the first phase of the marginalization of this fictional Turkish character.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, according to Daldal, Ali is represented as the source of problems, and although Egoyan “does not openly condemn Ali’s religious ‘otherness,’ . . . he has chosen to depict David’s family as devoted Christians,” which subjects Ali to discrimination and reminds the audience that “Ali is, after all, not ‘one of us,’ a stranger and, thus, a potential threat.”<sup>47</sup>

However, what Daldal disregards in her reading of the film is that both Ali’s religion and his sexual orientation function to highlight David’s character and his uncompromising attitude, rather than Egoyan’s. Ali is not treated as an object of desire in the film for the audience or for any other character in the film. He is not lit or dressed differently. He does not even speak English with an accent, which would have been an easier way to highlight his “foreignness,” had it been Egoyan’s aim to remind the audience that he is a stranger or the other. What Egoyan portrays, I would argue, is not Ali’s *difference*, but David’s *indifference* to the feelings of those around him. Similarly, Ali’s homosexuality functions in the same way as his religion does with regard to David’s character: it makes David’s rigid and discriminatory attitude visible.

Daldal’s reading of the film would have been justified had the film adopted Saroyan’s approach to the story, that is, assuming mastery over the past through its representation and through privileging one discourse over others. However, there are significant differences between how Saroyan’s film deals with the past and the rest of the film. According to Saroyan, his is a film that depicts historical events “realistically,” based on the belief that the truth can be captured and represented mimetically. In contrast to Saroyan’s historical epic, the rest of the film is set in the present time; it tackles the daily encounters of the characters and how the past shapes and reshapes

45 Ibid., 407–408.

46 Ibid., 414.

47 Ibid., 414–415.

their understanding of the present, as well as how present-day conditions influence the ways in which the past is perceived and narrated.

**Relocating Ararat.** *Ararat*, when read in its entirety—as opposed to the selective approach exemplified in the preceding sections—appears to have three important, and interwoven, issues at its heart. First is the temporal dislocation occurring as a result of the erasure of memory. The second issue the film tackles is the way that humans deal with memory and the way that the needs of present-day conditions shape the narration of the past. Finally, the third fundamental problem explored in *Ararat* concerns the (im)possibility of representing an event that not only devastated the generation who experienced it but also continues to have an effect on following generations.

The temporal dislocation that occurs as a result of the erasure of memory is revealed through narrational strategies. This approach also determines how the film deals with time as it moves freely (or perhaps inevitably) between different temporalities, making it a “haunted” narrative. In this respect, the film-within-the-film becomes a useful device for Egoyan. As Deleuze notes, film-within-film is one of the ways that time becomes visible in cinema, providing an ideal example of what he calls the “crystal image,” which is the basis of the time-image.<sup>48</sup> *Ararat* is filled with crystal images that, in Deleuze’s definition, have two distinct but indiscernible sides, “each simultaneously capturing and liberating the other.”<sup>49</sup> Cinema’s ability to make time visible, to show the existence of present and past together, is especially important in a film such as *Ararat* because its subject matter does not have a settled and accepted history.<sup>50</sup>

While *Ararat*’s film-within-the-film constantly underlines the difference between the two temporal zones, those passages are not the only moments where time becomes visible. Most of the scenes with Goriky also function as crystal moments. Goriky, portrayed as a ghostly character, acts almost as a corridor between the two different time zones: the diegetic time of the film-within-the-film being made, 1915, and the diegetic time of the rest of the film, 2001. Although Goriky as a character exists in both films (in Saroyan’s film as the little boy and in the rest of the film as the famous Armenian painter), it is not clear to which of the two sections the sequences that take place in his studio in the 1920s belong. Hence, in addition to occupying its own space within the narrative of the film, Goriky’s character also functions as a kind of mirror, as well as a screen, for both narratives. This not only gives Goriky a liminal existence between the two films but also allows the character to function as a means both to locate and dislocate the two temporalities. Moreover, Goriky’s ghost also appears at the premiere of Saroyan’s film, momentarily becoming visible to Ani as he stands in front of the poster of the film, looking directly at the camera. Goriky, haunted by his past, haunts the present.

48 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

49 Ibid., 68.

50 In an article that reads *Ararat*’s approach to its subject through Deleuze’s notion of the event, Elena Del Rio suggests that the way *Ararat* deals with the problem of representing an event that has catastrophic effects on generations resembles Deleuze’s “conceptualisation of time as Aion,” which disregards the chronological order of events. Elena Del Rio, “*Ararat* and the Event of the Mother,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 13–34.

How the needs of the present shape the narration of the past, in contrast, is dealt with predominantly through the dialogues between the characters. One of the best examples of this in the film takes place when Celia, Ani's stepdaughter, confronts Ani about her father's death. Celia is on a mission to have Ani accept the "truth" about her father (Ani's second husband) and wants her to admit that it was because of Ani's unjust treatment of him during their marriage that her father committed suicide. However, Celia's story hits the wall of denial head on as Ani categorically rejects her accusations. In one of their arguments Celia asks Ani to admit that, on the day her father died, Ani had told him that she was having an affair with another man and that she was going to leave him. According to Celia, her father would want to kill himself if Ani were having an affair. Ani's answer transcends the specific conversation they are having. In response to her question ("did he jump off the cliff?"), Ani says: "I can't remember what you want me to remember. Even if I could, I wouldn't. I don't need to." The scene takes place in front of a mirror where we see Ani herself but only Celia's reflection in the mirror. Although Ani also suffers from the pain caused by denial, she fails to recognize the reflection of this very same pain in the mirror (Figure 4). Ani, by refusing

Celia's request categorically ("Even if I could, I wouldn't"), also refuses to help her move on, failing or refusing to provide an explanation to Celia about her father's death. Rather than trying to hear and understand Celia, she is interested in defending herself,



Figure 4. Ani challenged by Celia about her father's death (Miramax, 2002).

so that, in place of a humane, compassionate response to a personal tragedy, their encounters concern the question of blame. While Celia needs to get a grip on the past to shape her present, Ani prefers to forget that part of her past to be able to continue living unaffected by it. She neither listens nor recognizes Celia's pain, even though she has dedicated herself to making her ancestors' pain heard and recognized by others. It is not a coincidence that Ani, as well as others in the film, continually reproduce what they suffer from. Hence Egoyan's intervention becomes an attempt to explore ways of dealing with and/or facing the other rather than aiming to represent the truth.

This scene leads to one of the most memorable scenes in the film, particularly in relation to Egoyan's approach to the representability of the event, which is the third most important issue the film scrutinizes. Unable to find the truth about her father's death, being refused an answer by the only person who can provide one, Celia is left enraged. She storms into the exhibition room and attacks Gorky's painting with a pocketknife, attempting to cut through the canvas, stabbing the painting. This painting, in Ani's words, frames Armenian identity and suffering for many Armenians and explains "who they are and how that got there." Even though it remains unclear

whether she was able to “tear” the image or not (Egoyan does not show an actual rip), he does provide the sound of the canvas being torn. According to Nichanian this is how Egoyan avoids the slash: by imagining it. “The real laceration could not be brought into representation. It persists and insists, however, in its very erasure. It is a glaring absence.”<sup>51</sup> This is also how Egoyan tears his own image: by constantly admitting the unrepresentability of the pain, of the rupture, of the event. A similar moment occurs in Gorky’s studio when he himself attempts to “destroy” his own painting.

Throughout the film Gorky is seen in his studio in the process of creating his most famous painting: *Artist and His Mother*. Gorky, originally from a village near Van in present-day Turkey, escaped to Russia with his family in 1915. When his mother later died of starvation, Gorky was reunited with his father in the United States at the age of sixteen, where he lived for the rest of his life. The scenes in his studio show the part of his life when he took on the project of painting his mother, Shushan, based on the photograph of her and himself that was taken in Van when he was a young boy. The photograph was sent to his father, and although Gorky later retrieved the photograph, it took him more than a decade to begin the painful task of trying to remember and represent his and his mother’s experiences in painting. Losing his homeland (motherland?), where the memories of his childhood and his mother are inscribed, Gorky is portrayed in the film as a silent man in agony, attempting to translate his memories into images. He tells his story through the portrait he is working on without uttering a single word throughout the film. He embodies displacement and loss: he is a man who is “mute,” who cannot find a way to mourn the loss of his homeland, his mother’s death, or the past. His “worldlessness” becomes his “wordlessness.”<sup>52</sup> The puncture the photograph creates says more than Gorky can with words.<sup>53</sup>

Gorky’s spectacular failure to represent his pain in painting is precisely the moment he is able to convey his agony. This, in return, allows Egoyan to reflect on his own

(in)ability to represent the event. In *Ararat*, Egoyan imagines that Gorky erases the hands of his mother, which he had already painted (Figure 5). This is an act that allows Gorky also to “touch” his mother at the very moment of destroying her painted hands.



Figure 5. Gorky erasing his mother's painted hands (Miramax, 2002).

51 Marc Nichanian, “Tearing and Destitution,” *Armenian Review* 49, nos. 1–4 (2004–2005): 6.

52 I borrow this wordplay from Jale Parla, “Car Narratives: A Subgenre in Turkish Novel Writing,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, nos. 2–3 (2003): 545.

53 For more information on Gorky’s life and art, see Peter Balakian, “Arshile Gorky and the Armenian Genocide,” *Art in America* 84 (1996); Matthew Spender, *From a High Place: A Life of Arshile Gorky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Nouritza Matossian, *Black Angel: The Life of Arshile Gorky* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).

Egoyan moves his camera behind the canvas, capturing the momentary trace Gorky leaves on the painting; a sense of touch develops in relation to the painting.

Gorky's endeavor, as well as Egoyan's attempt to represent it, is not merely to create an art object. It is an effort to give the image of the mother back her auratic existence, à la Walter Benjamin.<sup>54</sup> In a scene where Ani reads from her book on Gorky, she explains, "With this painting Gorky saved his mother from oblivion, snatching her out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal of life." In other words, the painting slows down the decaying process and gives the dead a place in history. The absence that marks the painting, the absence of the mother, the absence of the land, is not mastered by the painter but lived. A similar absence marks the lives of the characters in the film as the ghosts of dead fathers, and a ghost of long-departed history, haunt each character in different ways. Those very same ghosts also haunt the Turkish psyche. If one way to deal with these ghosts is to allow them to demand justice, another, albeit less successful, way is to continue denying their existence. Nevertheless, the film repeatedly admits that the ghosts of the past will remain in the present until or unless they are confronted, until or unless what the other has to say is heard.

**Conclusion.** *Ararat* is a film that deals with a very sensitive issue: the massacre of Ottoman Armenians and its legacy. It consequently occupied the center of many discussions in Turkey, not only because it questions the possibility of representing an event of devastating scale and challenges the traditionally favored approaches to representing traumatic events but also because the meaning of its subject matter is still interwoven with the politics of denial in Turkey. A film that is less about the question of "what really happened" and more about how the event affected generations of Armenians did not fit the existing discourse. In Turkey the answer to the question "Did it happen?" not only is a prerequisite for any type of hearing but also determines how much of what one has to say is heard. This in turn shaped the reception of the film and made its main concern—not listening to the other—its fate. Such reception, as I have argued, was due to the ways in which the dominant discourse disavows the issue rather than how the film dealt with it. This is not to say that the film is immune to criticism but that the criticism produced was selective in its approach to the text and was shaped by the existing nationalistic discourses.

Yet the general response to *Ararat* in Turkey should not be reduced only to the dismissive and defensive. Writing one of the few supportive articles in Turkey, journalist İsmet Berkan argued that, despite the general reaction, the film is not about reproducing hate but about how meaningless hatred is.<sup>55</sup> A few years after the film's release,

54 Here, I am thinking of Walter Benjamin's definition of aura and his distinction between photography and painting. For Benjamin, photography "is like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty," whereas with painting, the eyes will "never have their fill." Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 2007), 183. Hence a photograph appearing in a film, arresting the time of the narrative for a moment, is a different kind of experience from the stillness of a painting. In *Ararat* when Arshile Gorky decides to paint his (dead) mother from a photograph, and when Egoyan in return decides to represent the act of the painting, destruction (death) and reconstruction (giving her back an aura, an eternal existence) take place at the same time in the same cinematic space.

55 İsmet Berkan, "Tartışılan Ararat," *Radikal*, December 24, 2001, [http://www.radikal.com.tr/veriler/2001/12/24/haber\\_24547.php](http://www.radikal.com.tr/veriler/2001/12/24/haber_24547.php).

the first conference with presentations that challenged the official discourse on the Armenian question took place in Istanbul. Despite protests from radical nationalists and attempts to stop the event, which were successful at first, the conference took place in September 2005. Officially titled “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy,” it was also referred to as the “Alternative Armenian Conference.”

The film managed to trigger a response in other areas, too. Recently, a historical Armenian church on Akhtamar Island near Van, the church that Raffi visits in *Ararat*, was restored and opened for communion for the first time in ninety-five years. On the surface, what appears to be an independent event was, in fact, initiated by Hüseyin Çelik, the member of the parliament for Van in 2002 who later became the deputy leader of the governing Justice and Development Party. Following the film’s release, Çelik said that “the best answer to *Ararat* would be the restoration of the church.”<sup>56</sup> However, the rhetoric is still defensive and one that is engaged in finding ways to “answer” *Ararat*.

*Ararat*, in many respects, is a ghost story. The ghost of Raffi’s father, who makes him search for “some kind of explanation” of who he is; the ghost of Celia’s father, whose death remains unresolved for Celia and drives her to violent ends to force others to speak out for him or about him; looking for something, something to satisfy the ghost, looking for a “shape that is absent.” “*Finding the shape described by . . . absence* captures perfectly the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time,” writes Avery Gordon.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the most important and powerful example of this search is visible in Gorky’s quest in finding the shape described by his mother’s absence and Egoyan’s aesthetic preferences in representing it. It is not only his mother’s ghost that is haunting Gorky but Gorky himself who haunts the narrative space with his silence, with his quest for the shape described by absence. The film confronts the spectator with absences of various forms, pointing ultimately to the absence of the very people around whom the dramas unfold: Armenians in Anatolia, in today’s Turkey. \*

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56 Hüseyin Çelik, “Kilisenin Onarımı En Güzel Yanıt Olur,” *Hürriyet*, January 17, 2002, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/printnews.aspx?DocID=48880>.

57 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 6.