

Atom Egoyan, an Enemy of the State of Denial
With 'Ararat,' Filmmaker Takes On Disputed Turkish Atrocities

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Sunday, November 24, 2002; Page G01

CANNES, France

Genocide is ugly to observe, difficult to comprehend but essential to remember.

That is the message Atom Egoyan brings to the world. Not just in the immediate sense of the horror of massacre; but in other, deeper senses, as in a collective memory of violence, a legacy of self-doubt and a general condition of nameless apprehension. Those are the subjects proper of "Ararat," his account of the Armenian genocide in Turkey during the First World War: not just the slaughter, but the ripples of slaughter. And if you ever imagined a bringer of bad news, Atom Egoyan is pretty much what you'd come up with.

Dour chap, all in black, a kind of avatar from the abattoir, stands out in any crowd, but in this crowd particularly. He happens to be sitting at a fashionable bistro during a time of festival. There is much flesh on view, a sultry density to the air, palms weaving in a hot sea breeze, throngs, thongs, hustle, a whole commercial world dead-set on selling the cheap sensation, the bogus memory, the curve of flank, the twinkle of the eye.

And here is Atom Egoyan, the great Canadian director ("The Sweet Hereafter" is his masterpiece), with his message from the grave. He's sober, responsible, focused, his eyes shielded behind the hip glasses that you're allowed to wear only if you're a director or an Italian architect. He's every bit the paradigm of the modern media star -- erudite, comfortable in interview, attractive except for his dead seriousness. He seems weighted with woe, twisted with discomfort. Yet because he alone has the special grace of those who have chosen to deliver the ugly truth, there's also a weird radiance, almost a beauty, to him. He's not quite Elie Wiesel, but he has Wiesel's moral splendor.

"You wonder," he says earnestly, picking each word with the care of a jeweler searching for tiny gears through a loupe, "how is it possible to be the object of hate. It invades you in a profound way. It permeates your life. What is there that these other people could have projected onto you? What do you represent?"

Everywhere around, it is the South of France, except for the tragedy-haunted mind and visage of Egoyan. Life goes on; the past is gone to dust and ashes, blown away on the breeze, and everybody's too busy with the here and the now to engage old tragedies. Smaller problems are everywhere, such as the minor one involving the reporter who can't order from the menu because he is severely French-challenged, and Egoyan, the cosmopolitan, who enters the transaction swiftly, dominates it, orders what will be the best meal that No-Speaky-Frenchy Boy will have during the festival, and then returns to the big It.

It.

You know, the thing.

You can't call it a holocaust, because that word seems to have been connected to another genocide. Whatever you call it, the story recounted by Egoyan is melancholy: In 1915, a newly powerful group of modern thinkers called the Young Turks, having taken over the government, decided it was time for what we would now call ethnic cleansing. Beginning on April 24 of that year, the cleansing commenced with the murder of 500 intellectuals in Constantinople and continued for over a year. Soldiers of Armenian descent were separated from their units and murdered. Then firearms were confiscated from villagers and the next step, "re-settlement," began. The chosen method of extermination was the forced march to a new area under brutal treatment, without adequate food, during inclement weather. By the end of 1916, the Armenian population of Turkey had declined to 1 million from 2.5 million.

Some people noticed. "The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared to the suffering of the Armenian race in 1915," wrote Henry Morgenthau Sr., the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire.

But hardly anybody else noticed, except a striving Austrian politician with plans of his own.

"Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" said Adolf Hitler, as he told his minions how easy it would be to get away with the murder of the Jews.

"The funny thing is," Egoyan says, finding a trickle of irony in a dark reality, "the Turks had a very good history with the Jews. It was one of the best places to live if you were Jewish. And yet still, they had this need to annihilate. Do people *need* something to hate? And what the Turks projected onto the Armenians, it was very similar to what the Nazis projected onto the Jews."

So the film "Ararat," which opens Friday in Washington, is a consecrated act of remembering. It will not let the past fade. But at the same time, it's a blast of anger at the Turks, today's Turks, not for their grandfathers' crimes but for ignoring their grandfathers' crimes.

Perhaps its angers and its ambiguities explain its density. In typical Egoyan fashion, the movie unspools at a leisurely pace, examining not only genocide but the interpretations of genocide. In an odd sense, it's a study not of the act itself but of the documents of the act: a memoir by an American diplomat who witnessed the events, a movie seeking to re-create both the memoir and by extension the event, and a famous painting by a survivor.

Each document has a story and a cast, each story is connected to the other two and each plays ironically off the other two. So the movie slides backward and forward elliptically in time, the characters intermingle, interact, love, cheat, betray, hate, haunt, stare. It's very

human, very messy, very tough and pretty damned difficult. Sometimes we're in a movie about a genocide and sometimes that movie turns real and we're *in* the genocide. And sometimes we're in modern Toronto, amid Armenian survivors and survivors' children, and the intensity of their squabbling seems to be, unstated, a function of the weight of memory. And sometimes we're in an interrogation room, where an old customs officer believes a young Armenian filmmaker is smuggling drugs into Canada in the film tins he begs the older man not to open.

And sometimes we're -- well, we're lost, because the movie is as knotted as a tapestry, obeying its own interior logic, working out its own internal dynamics as it goes along. It's not easy viewing for the masses, as the severely intellectual Canadian is the first to admit.

"Essentially it came out of an earlier script which I wrote when I was 18 -- it was one of my first scripts -- and just discovering my Armenian heritage, after denying it for most of my youth. But I couldn't get it together, and I put it away for many years."

Moviegoers will probably thank him for those many years, during which he learned his craft and developed his style. He moved smoothly from the experimental films that caught his fancy at the University of Toronto to a number of banal American shows filming in Canada, including a retread of "Twilight Zone" and "Friday the 13th: The Series," for which he became a sleek, efficient contract director.

His Armenian family, dislodged from the homeland by the ugly events of 1915, had come to rest in Cairo, where he was born in 1960. The family, fearing more cataclysm, moved to Canada shortly thereafter; he grew up in Vancouver, with parents who were merchants and yet were also artists. He majored in international relations, graduating with honors. Yet his artistic interests beckoned him.

Thus he began pushing hard at the limits while quite young, and like several other Canadian directors (David Cronenberg comes to mind), he put aside the easy prosperity of TV and its segue to Hollywood. He instead made "The Adjuster" in 1991, a spooky, slow-moving but mesmerizing film about an insurance adjuster who becomes absorbed in other people's lives. Other art-house hits followed, in his characteristic "elliptical" style, in which time folds in on itself, the camerawork is stately, beautiful but cold, the characters highly intelligent but highly neurotic, the obsessions sometimes quite erotic. "Exotica" -- very sexualized -- was a big art-house hit in 1994, but it wasn't until "The Sweet Hereafter" that he broke through to a wide audience.

It was also his most audience-accessible film, almost a subconscious precursor to "Ararat" in the sense that it was about a terrible occurrence and the need to find out who was responsible. It haunts Egoyan, as well as most other Armenians, that to this day there's been no real coming to account with the Turks. Egoyan remarks, "Oh, all that was so long ago, they say. Let's move on."

He came back to the genocide after a confluence of events: A journalist wondered if, under the surface of "The Sweet Hereafter," there wasn't an allusion to the events of

1915. Shortly after that, his son asked him a question about 1915. He realized that in some sense all his films had been about atrocity and denial, but that he'd never confronted the theme directly.

He got out his old script.

"Suddenly I remembered when I was 18 and all that came flooding over me," he recalls. "I needed to tell people."

Some part of "Ararat" is frankly polemical: It means to move those events back to the center of world attention, not for revenge but for some sort of reckoning.

"It's absurd to expect an apology from people who have not been told it happened," he said, against the din of wealthy Frenchmen eating brilliantly prepared gobbets of seafood.

Thus the picture isn't a chronological account of the campaign or a dramatic re-creation of it, like, say, "Schindler's List."

"I show the machines of extermination, the marches, the resistance, the torture. But that wasn't what excited me. What excited me was describing how people endured the horror of living with something so cataclysmic that has been systematically denied."

He knows how hard this is, not on him and on the Armenians but also on the audience.

"These are hugely complicated issues," he allows, "and I certainly have enormous expectations of my viewer."