How to remember the unimaginable

Postmemory, *prosthetic memory*, and generations of remembering the Armenian genocide in film

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Title: How to remember the unimaginable: *Postmemory*, *prosthetic memory*, and generations of remembering the Armenian genocide in film

"How does one remember?" Asked author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel when interviewed for a *Newsweek* article in 1975. "It defies language, it defies memory, it defies categories."[1] Differently put: according to Wiesel, there is no way of understanding the Holocaust, of grasping the meaning of a genocide in general, of truly comprehending something that is inherently incomprehensible. "Yet", he goes on to say, "one can remember and one must. Something happened then. Something of an ontological nature."[2] Wiesel proposes to remember something that surpasses memory, which is a task that, at least initially, appears to be an oxymoron. What it means, however, is that the task of remembering is not about constructing a single definitive memory – a singular history – but acknowledging that something has existed – an atrocity and, more importantly, its victims. Or, as Wiesel has put it in his famous 1958 autobiographical account *Night*: "To forget would not only be dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."[3]

For as long as wars have been waged and atrocities committed, they have been tied to acts of remembrance. And for as long as people have engaged in acts of remembrance, these acts of remembrance have been a complex cultural practice. But while remembrance culture is important in the context of violent instances throughout history in general, remembrance culture in the context of genocides takes a special place. First coined by lawyer Raphäel Lemkin in 1944 and recognized as a crime under international law four years later, genocide is not primarily defined as an attempt to kill, but as an attempt to destroy "in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."[4] The very act of remembering, then, can become one of the practices through which a community can be reconstructed.[5] And, taking it a step further, a crime that has not merely the killing but the *destruction* of a people at its core – as is the case with genocide – has at least partially failed in its attempt to eradicate when there are survivors that rebuild their culture through remembrance.

Differently put: a crime which has the goal to make the world forget its victims fails when these victims are being remembered. Even if it is a crime that, according to Wiesel, goes beyond what memory can comprehend. It is, then, not about finding a singular memory,

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[1] "Newsweek," Internet Archive, accessed August 12, 2023, https://archive.org/details/newsweek85maynewy/page/n427/mode/2up?view=theater.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 156, Kindle.
[4] "Genocide," United Nations, accessed August 12, 2023, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml.
[5] Jeffrey Blustein, "Conceptions of Genocide and the Ethics of Memorialization," in Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Memory, ed. Jutta Lindert and Armen T. Marsoobian (New York City: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 25.

or even collection of memories, that can represent what a genocide means, as such a task would be impossible. It is, instead, about the *act* of engaging with memory – the act of remembrance – that is understood as the defiance of a genocide's goal, and, following Wiesel, the duty of the survivor.[6] This centrality of remembrance – in this case understood as an activity of continuous engagement with memory – in the aftermath of a genocide is the issue I am exploring within this paper.

At the same time, the remembrance of any event – yet alone a collectively traumatic one – is anything but straight-forward. "One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes", wrote photographer and philosopher Susan Sontag in one of her final essays, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, following with: "One should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show."[7] If we try to remember an event, so Sontag's argument, we have to be aware of our perception when looking at a representation of it. The experience of a spectator looking at a representation is nothing compared to the experience of destruction. And, as Sontag's essay sets out from the beginning, reacting to Virginia Woolf's essay on photographs of the Spanish Civil War, there is no universal conclusion that can be drawn from looking at these representations: "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain."[8] According to Sontag, while Woolf does understand that class and gender play a role in a person's perception of other people's pain, she criticizes Woolf's belief in an almost universal human capacity to be moved in a specific way by pictures of atrocity. Following Woolf, if people could only see those representations, they would prevent further ones from happening.[9] But representation – and, by extension then, remembering – is inherently subjective and inherently circumstantial. What an observer sees in – and takes away from – a mediated representation of an event is not only dependent on the physical *seeing* of a picture but the context it is put in.[10]

Yet, these mediated representations of atrocity also contribute to people's construction of memory. According to Sontag: "To aim at the perpetuation of memories means, inevitably, that one has undertaken the task of continually renewing, of creating memories."[11] What Sontag talks about in her essay is, of course, the construction (and creation) of memory

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[6] Wiesel, *Night*, 156, Kindle.
[7] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 83.
[8] Sontag, *Pain of Others*, 4.
[9] Ibid, 4, 10.
[10] Ibid, 6.
[11] Ibid, 76.

through the medium of photographs. When talking about the Holocaust, Sontag uses the example of photographs of the liberation of concentration camps that most people now associate with the Holocaust. Only that those photographs have been taken in an extraordinary moment of the Holocaust – namely, at its end. Not only is a spectator's point of view on photographs subjective, then, but so is the photograph itself, as it only captures a singular moment of a whole and is often selective.[12] Nevertheless, parts of the Holocaust *have* been photographed. Elie Wiesel is one of the prisoners pictured in one of the most reproduced pictures of the Buchenwald liberation, depicting prisoners of the "Little Camp" staring at the camera with most of them lying on bunks in one of the barracks.[13] However, when mediated representations – and, following from these representations, remembrance – of a genocide do *not* arise out of photographs but out of an explicitly scripted representation such as a moving picture, questions surrounding these representations become even more complex.[14] At the same time, an increasing number of scholars over the last few years have also recognized the potential of fictional and non-fictional representations of history on film.

"Even the most biting critiques of historical film, those most unwilling to consider it serious history," writes Alison Landsberg in her book *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*, "will recognize that its great power is its capacity to bring the past literally into view, to make it feel real, to flesh it out."[15] Landsberg's argument is that the affective nature of film can provide a viewer with an affective kind of historical knowledge written scholarship might not be able to. Or, at the very least, might have a harder time with. The aspects that make moving pictures complex – the manipulation of story through editing, acting, scripting, sound, and the awareness that a spectator has of this – is also precisely what makes film appealing to large audiences – and effective in shaping ideas about history.

Landsberg is, of course, not the only scholar to have recognized the potential that film has for the representation, discussion, and study of history. "Imagining – or inventing – the

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[12] Ibid, 73.

[13] Elie Wiesel has been identified as the seventh person from the left in the second row of bunkbeds. See: "Former Prisoners of the "Little Camp" in Buchenwald," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed August 12, 2023, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/former-prisoners-of-the-little-camp-in-buchenwald.

[14] Sontag makes a strong case of the staged nature of most photographs of wars and other atrocities predating the Vietnam War, however, the difference between a staged photograph and a scripted moving picture is the understanding most observers have of the degree of scriptedness. Specifically, Sontag observes that only a photograph can be used as evidence in court, whereas a scripted moving picture cannot. See: Sontag, *Pain of Others*, 40, 49.

[15] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 591-606, Kindle.

past through the artifice of film can shape our understanding of it more profoundly than the rigorous reconstruction of its archival fragments in scholarly texts,"[16] write Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry in the introduction of their edited volume *Film, History and Memory*. And that representation in film – especially in the at least semi-fictional Hollywood blockbusters and arthouse movies that regularly tackle historical material – is not necessarily translated entirely and uncritical into historical fact by the viewer is, according to Carlsten and McGarry, not a problem but another one of its assets. That film shows an interpretation of the past – and that the viewer is aware of that – helps the viewer to also understand "the central principle of historiography: that history is a process of interpretation, reflecting a dialogue between the past and present."[17] But nevertheless, writes historian Robert A. Rosenstone in the same volume, who, after writing an autobiography of John Reed, had served as a historical advisor for the Warren Beatty film *Reds* about John Reed's life: "After years of researching and writing Reed's biography, I can never think of his adventures without to some extent seeing him in terms of some images created by *Reds*' director Beatty."[18] The images, dialogues, and stories that films employ to talk about history have an impact on how we think of history. Even when they are taken in critically.

But how do people continue to remember an event that they have only ever known through its representations? And, as is especially crucial in the context of genocide, how does continuous memory construction happen over time, aided by old and resulting in new representations of the event considered crucial to remember? What happens if we try comprehending the incomprehensible? What happens, in other words, when we engage with memory? Especially if the people who do engage with memory are generations increasingly removed from a traumatic event, when they take the position of spectators, looking at genocide through the lens of media?

In this paper, I contribute to answering those questions by exploring the engagement with memory – remembering – in the case of the Armenian genocide through the medium of film. My central research question is hereby concerned with how survivors of the Armenian genocide as well as their descendants compare in their engagement with the Armenian genocide through the medium of film between the decades immediately following the Armenian genocide (1915-1922) and the first decades of the 21st century. During the first part of my analysis, I will thereby focus on the 20th century and, respectively, the survivor

[16] Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry, *Film, History and Memory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.
[17] Ibid, 8.
[18] Ibid, 195.

generation's and second-generation survivor's engagement with the Armenian genocide through film. My first sub-question is thereby focusing on how Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory can be applied in this context in order to explain differences in approaches to remembrance of the Armenian genocide. In the second part of my analysis, applying Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory, I will investigate how increasing (generational) distance to and media representations of an event, especially a deeply traumatic one, has an impact on how descendants engage with, both, historical material and questions of remembrance.

While I have started this paper by discussing the Holocaust, this is not a comparative study between the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide. It is, however, a comparative study that looks at generational difference of engagement with a genocide – in this case, the Armenian genocide – on film. It is difficult to not talk about the Holocaust when talking about genocide. Not only was the term *genocide* predominantly developed in reference to the Holocaust, so was Hirsch's concept of postmemory.[19] Likewise, Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory has been developed, among other examples such as slavery and immigration in the United States, in reference to U.S. American remembrance culture of the Holocaust.[20] At the same time, those concepts invite themselves to scholarly application beyond the case of the Holocaust. By selecting the Armenian genocide as my case study, I have consciously selected a case in which film has played, as I will show, an early and important role in engaging with memory and continues to do so into the present.

I will continue this paper by introducing and defining the two central concepts to this paper – postmemory and prosthetic memory – as well as explaining how I will apply them to the films I have selected for this study. I will then outline my paper's methodology of film analysis as well as position my present research into film, memory, and the Armenian genocide in the larger historiography. Following this, I will conduct my analysis in two chapters – the first looking at filmic engagement with the Armenian genocide in the 20th, answering my first research question, and the second at filmic engagement with the Armenian genocide in the 21st century, answering my second research question. Finally, I will summarize my final results in the conclusion and suggest directions for future research into this field.

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[19] Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," Poetics Today 17, no. 4 (1996): 662, https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/1773218.

[20] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 48-57, Kindle.

What are postmemory and prosthetic memory?

Central to the first part of my analysis is Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. A term originally coined during the 1990s, postmemory is a form of memory distinct from the memory that members of the survivor generation have of a traumatic event. Specifically, postmemory is a term that gives distinct attention to the memories the children of those survivors, or so-called second-generation survivors. The traumatic event is therefore not one the second-generation survivors have partaken in themselves, yet it is deeply personal through their familiar connection to it. According to Hirsch, "Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its objective or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."[21] It thereby "characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created."[22] Hirsch developed the concept of postmemory originally in the field of literature studies, specifically referencing Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* where the memories of the survivor-generation father and second-generation survivor son regarding the Holocaust are represented next to each other. The concept has since been applied outside the field of Holocaust studies, with Hirsch specifically naming the Armenian genocide as a possible field of application of it.[23]

For the first part of my analysis, I have selected two films, one representing a survivor generation's engagement with memories of the Armenian genocide and a second-generation's engagement with memories of the Armenian genocide respectively. The first film, *Ravished Armenia*, was released in 1919, while the Armenian genocide was, at least if we take 1922 as its ending point, still ongoing. The film is based on the survivor account of Arshaluys (Aurora) Mardiganian, who also portrays herself in the film. The second film, *Mother*, is a movie by Armenian director Henri Verneuil, and was released in 1991. Verneuil, who was born in Armenia, emigrated as a child to France and is part of the second-generation or, one could argue depending on the end date set for the Armenian genocide, 1.5-generation survivors of the genocide. By looking at both films, I will assess the difference in which the

[21] Hirsch, "Past Lives," 662.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 18-19.

memory of the Armenian genocide is approached and engaged with in the films and whether postmemory is visible in this case.

The second concept that I am applying in this study is Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory, outlined in her homonymous book *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, published in 2004. Similar to postmemory, a prosthetic memory is a memory constructed after the fact, through an indirect engagement with a traumatic event, rather than a direct experience of it. In comparison to Hirsch's concept of postmemory, prosthetic memory construction is, however, not dependent on a close personal connection to the traumatic event. A prosthetic memory is thereby constructed through an engagement with a "mediated representation (seeing a film, visiting a museum, watching a television miniseries)"[24] rather than through a direct connection to the event, which, in the case of a postmemory, would be a close personal connection to a survivor of the traumatic event. At the same time, these memories, as Landsberg stresses, are still deeply personal. While Landsberg stresses the prosthetic and, thereby, interchangeable nature of those memories – the construction of those memories is therefore not only based on engagement with media but also subject to a continuous commodification through media – "they feel real, they help condition how a person thinks about the world and might be instrumental in articulating an ethical relation to the other."[25] A prosthetic memory, differently put, is therefore a very personal memory of something the person has only an impersonal – and, literally, mediated – relationship to.

Landsberg's concept is particularly important for the second part of my analysis, in which I am looking at an engagement with memory of the Armenian genocide in films produced by people multiple generations removed from the actual events. In this part of the analysis, I am going to look at two different media produced during the 21st century, or approximately one-hundred years removed from the actual historical events. Specifically, I am looking at two episodes of the reality television series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* – "Mother Armenia" and "It Feels Good To Be Home" from the 10th season of the show – in which multiple cast-members are traveling to Armenia and actively engage with the memory of the Armenian genocide. Even though the Kardashians are of Armenian descent from the paternal side of their family, their memories of the Armenian genocide are multiple generations removed from the actual events – having been born in America, to an Armenian-

[24] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 327, Kindle.
[25] Ibid, 337.

American father who has been born to Armenian parents that had migrated to the United States prior to his birth. Additionally, I am also going to look at the animated documentary *Aurora's Sunrise* by Armenian director Inna Sahakyan from 2022, which reflects on the story of Aurora Mardiganian and the making of the film *Ravished Armenia* from 1919, that I am looking at in the first part of my analysis. The film is using parts of the original 1919 film as well as animation to tell the story of Mardiganian, thereby actively reconstructing a past memory of the Armenian genocide through past media representations of the genocide – the film *Ravished Armenia* itself, but also later interviews with Mardiganian – which makes this particularly suitable for the application of a concept like prosthetic memory.

While, as I have stated above, the concept of postmemory is primarily about the engagement of a second-generation survivor with a traumatic event and prosthetic memory is primarily about a mediated engagement with a traumatic event, even when a person does not have a personal connection to that event, I do not understand them as mutually exclusive. Postmemory – like prosthetic memory – closely connects a mediated engagement with an event to a personal connection.[26] Likewise, the central aspect of prosthetic memory – and of postmemory – is how personal these engagements growing out of an affective connection with the past are.[27] Rather than drawing a strict cut-off point between the first part of my analysis and the second – between the 20th and 21st century, postmemory and prosthetic memory – I understand these concepts as a continuum on which to understand how people engage with and are engaged by media.

The Armenian genocide on film: analyzing the medium

Throughout my analysis, I will work closely with the methodology outlined in historian Maarten Perenboom's book *History and Film: Moving Pictures and the Study of the Past*, first published in 2011. Perenboom's analysis is particularly suitable for this specific case because it can be applied to, both, fictional films such as the two sources I am looking at in the first part of my analysis as well as non-fiction films such as the three sources I am looking at in the second part of my analysis. Additionally, while Perenboom's approach gives a basic methodological framework for a film analysis, it remains flexible when it comes to the theoretical lens through films are being looked at. Because of that, Perenboom's analysis leaves room for an application of concepts like postmemory and prosthetic memory.

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[26] Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 30.
[27] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 1536, Kindle.

Perenboom's analysis roughly consists of three separate steps in analyzing a film: firstly, the analysis of the film's content; secondly, the analysis of the film's production; and finally, the analysis of the film's reception.[28] When it comes to answering my specific research question, the analysis of the film's content and production are more important than the analysis of the film's reception, which is why my analysis is going to focus primarily on those first two steps.

Expanding the state-of-the-art: the Armenian genocide, memory, and film

The Armenian genocide and memory culture with relation to different forms of media has been a topic explored in previous scholarship. This is not inherently surprising, considering that survivors began publishing accounts of the Armenian genocide in the form of books or, as in Aurora Mardiganian's case, both in the form of a written and filmed autobiographical account, immediately following the genocide. Additionally, those accounts have been widely received and, especially in the case of the 1933 German novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel, have proven important in generating a wider understanding of the parallels between the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide and, with that, have contributed to the concept formation of genocide years prior to the final conceptualization of the term.[29] Engagement with the Armenian genocide and memory construction of the genocide through media is central to the history of the Armenian genocide as a whole – and to the political activism leading up to its wide-spread recognition as a genocide, in the case of many countries only in recent years. It is also equally unsurprising that especially Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory has been applied within the context of literature[30], documentary[31], and film[32] to the case of the Armenian genocide.

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[28] Maarten Pereboom, *History and Film: Moving Pictures and the Study of the Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 215-216.

[29] See for example: Norbert Otto Eke, "Planziel Vernichtung Zwei Versuche über das Unfaßbare des Völkermords: Franz Werfels Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh (1933) und Edgar Hilsenraths Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken (1989)," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 71, no. 4 (1997): 701, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03375657.

[30] See for example: Alicja Piechucka, ""Never Trust a Survivor": Historical Trauma, Postmemory and the Armenian Genocide in Kurt Vonnegut's Bluebeard," *Text Matters* 11, no. 1 (2021): 240, https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.11.16.

[31] Duygu Gül Kaya, "100 Voices after 100 years: Remembering the Armenian Genocide in diaspora," *The International Journal of Media and Culture* 16, no. 2 (2018): 128

[32] Donna-Lee Frieze, "Three films, one genocide: Remembering the Armenian Genocide through *Ravished Armenia*(s)," in *Remembering Genocide*, ed. Nigel Eltringham and Pam Maclean (New York: Routledge, 2014), 47.

However, especially when it comes to discussions of film, there has only been a small – and fairly recent – increase in studies published on the topic. This could be connected to the equally recent increase in films exploring the Armenian genocide, with only very little films about the subject having been released before the 1990s and, by contrast, sometimes multiple releases per year since the mid-2000s.[33] Something that is not an Armenian genocide exclusive, but, according to Donna-Lee Frieze, general trend in film releases about genocides.[34] Additionally, while *Ravished Armenia* – a movie released in 1919 – was quite successful during its own time, as I will outline in the first chapter of this paper, most of the film was lost a few decades after its release, with parts only resurfacing in the 1990s, which has made a study of the film only recently possible.[35]

Since some of the material of *Ravished Armenia* (1919) has resurfaced, the material has not only been cut and adapted, but has with Frieze's study also been put into a comparative perspective, comparing the re-release of the material as adapted in two separate films, *Ravished Armenia* (2009) and *Credo* (2005).[36] Additionally, even before the comparative study by Frieze, Elke Hecker compared multiple perspectives on memory in her study on Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002) and highlighted the importance of acknowledging generational differences in approaching an understanding of memory.[37] What both studies are missing, however, is an approach that compares multiple films *and* memory cultures. In a way, this study is built on the ideas of both these predecessors, while taking a more extensive approach. By doing so, I hope to both capture the detail for different films' use of material, as Frieze has done, as well as Hecker's attention to generational differences. This study therefore fills a scholarly gap that, I think, can contribute to bettering a comprehensive understanding of survivor's engagement with memory.

Chapter 1: Survivors and second-generation survivors' memory in the 20th century

"My story begins with Easter Sunday morning, in April, 1915."[38] This is the first line in *Ravished Armenia*, Aurora Mardiganian's story as written down by Henry Leyford Gates, on

[33] "Movies and TV Shows tagged with keyword "armenian-genocide"," IMDb, accessed August 15, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/search/keyword/?keywords=armenian-genocide&sort=release_date,desc&mode=detail&page=1&ref_=kw_nxt.
[34] Frieze, "Three films, one genocide," 39.
[35] Ibid, 49.
[36] Ibid, 38-40.
[37] Elke Hecker, "Screening the Armenian Genocide: Atom Egoyan's Ararat between Erasure and Structure," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28, no. 4 (2010): 140, https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2010.0068.
[38] Ravished Armenia: The story of Aurora Mardiganian (…), p. 15

which the eponymous film would be based a year after its publication. Mardiganian's story begins in April 1915, at a time when by some estimates two million Armenians were living in the Ottoman Empire, only weeks before the Ottoman authorities would begin with the forceful deportation and massacre of Armenian men, women, and children – including almost the entirety of Mardiganian's family.[39] April 1915 marks the beginning of what more than three decades later would come to be understood as a genocide. And *Ravished Armenia* would become the "first film made on the [Armenian] Genocide and possibly the first film produced on *any* genocide."[40]

When Mardiganian's story was published 1918 in the United States, where she had fled as a refugee in 1917, it became part of a wider relief effort for the Armenian atrocities. Mardiganian's involvement in this relief effort and the film based on her life generated, according to estimates by Anthony Slide, 117 million dollars – an equivalent of 2.5 billion dollars in 2014 when Slide published his book on the film.[41] Mardiganian saw only very little of that money: according to an interview with Mardiganian before her death, she had signed a document that had been presented to her by her American legal guardian Mrs. Gates, at a time when she only understood little English, "that would permit her to come to Los Angeles, where she should have her picture taken."[42] The picture, in fact, was a motion picture, and Mardiganian had signed a contract that would require her to star in *Ravished Armenia*, being paid 15 dollars a week.[43] Mardiganian broke an angle during the filming process and had to continue filming while being injured, suffered through a literal replay of the traumatic experiences she had endured only a few years prior, and eventually collapsed of exhaustion while touring for the film.[44]

At the same time, U.S. American and, later, international audiences and critics received the film well. In Europe, it even gained attention from the League of Nations who screened the movie before its London release.[45] *Ravished Armenia* made Mardiganian an overnight star. And it raised immense funds for and awareness of the Armenian genocide. Its success is now largely attributed to a combination of authenticity that came with Mardiganian's presence in and surrounding the promotion of the film, as well as a

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[39] Ravished Armenia and the story of Aurora Mardiganian, p. 6 (BACKGROUND BOOK)
[40] Three films, one genocide (Donna-Lee Frieze), p. 45
[41] Anthony Slide, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 27, Kindle.
[42] Ibid, 12.
[43] Ibid, 12.
[44] Ibid, Foreword.
[45] Ibid, 12.

commercially successful story construct relying on themes of Orientalism, sex, and violence, as well as moral undertones that stressed the Christian religion and history of Armenians.[46] In the decades after its release, however, the movie got lost, with parts of it only resurfacing in the 1990s and being enhanced, edited, and re-released in 2009.[47] At present, what remains of *Ravished Armenia* is the book that it has been based on, one movie script, and some surviving newly edited footage of the film.

The film *Ravished Armenia* made Mardiganian into what filmmaker Atom Egoyan has called a "super-survivor", a woman who had "lived through the experience of genocide, lived through the experience of making a film about that genocide, and then witnessed both events effectively disappear – one through the denial of its perpetrators, the other through the physical loss of the film itself."[48] Studying the existing material is challenging because of precisely this complicated history of both the making and disappearance of the film. The remaining material only features a brief scene in which Mardiganian can be identified, however, while Mardiganian's role can be assumed to be much larger in the film as it was originally released, the existing material does give an idea about the general focus of the film's narrative. It is, firstly, heavily gendered: even the remaining fragment of the footage features multiple scenes of rape, one scene of a woman being sold at a slave market, focusing largely on mothers and daughters pitted against Ottoman soldiers.[49] Secondly, there is a large religious element to the remaining footage: not only do Christian Orthodox religious leaders feature prominently, so do also churches and monasteries, as well as one scene of Muslim prayer.[50] Both the strong emphasis on gendered as well as religious elements can also be found in way the movie was promoted, with one advertisement, for example promising a "tender romance", "beautiful daughters of refined, delicate mothers", and "prosperous Christians" as part of the feature.[51]

How does the film then engage with the memory of the Armenian genocide? Whether we look at the original book, the remaining script, the contemporary discourse, or the material left of the film: what *Ravished Armenia* tries – and as one could argue succeeds in – is recreating scenes that are claimed to be accurate representations of the genocide. *Ravished*

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[46] Frieze, "Three films, one genocide," 44.
[47] Slide, Story of Aurora Mardiganian, 28-29, Kindle.
[48] Ibid, Foreword.
[49] "Ravished Armenia (2019)," Internet Archive, accessed August 13, 2023, video, 9:59-11:48, 14:29-15:01, https://archive.org/details/RavishedArmenia1919.
[50] Ibid, 15:17, 18:28.
[51] Slide, *Story of Aurora Mardiganian*, 3, Kindle.

Armenia tries to communicate what has really happened by telling the story of an individual person (Aurora Mardiganian) that viewers can identify and empathize with. That is not to say that the movie is entirely historically accurate Mardiganian has, for example, famously stated that the most famous scene of the movie, of naked women being crucified, is not historically accurate but a more sanitized version of more graphic reality.[52] What it tries to do – or at the very least sells itself as – is to be a historical document that exists in absence of real historical footage of the genocide. It tells a story, playing on recognizable themes (religion, sexuality) and tropes (it becomes clear from the script that the film was featuring a love interest that was not present in the original material) for a Western audience, while, at the same time, claiming to be a document, aided and accompanied by the "living document" of Aurora Mardiganian, present in the movie and, following its release, at its screenings.

That this type of engagement with the Armenian genocide through film had already shifted by the time second-generation survivors produced films becomes clear when looking at the example of the French film *Mother* (1991, called *Mayrig* in the French original) by Henri Verneuil. Verneuil was born 1920 as Achod Malakian to Armenian parents in Rodosto, then part of the Ottoman empire. As a consequence of the Armenian genocide, Vermeuil emigrated at the age of four with his family to Marseille in France and, at the time of his death, was a naturalized French citizen.[53] His date of birth – depending on when the end-date of the Armenian genocide is put, either in 1917 or, according to some sources stressing the continuation of genocidal acts up until 1922[54] – makes Verneuil what Marianne Hirsch has called either a "1.5 generation survivor" – a child-survivor of a traumatic event, such as the Armenian genocide – a generation closely associated with second-generation survivors, or a second generation survivor – a child of survivors. Both of which are predominantly associated with the concept of postmemory.[55] *Mother* is one of two semi-autobiographical movies that Verneuil made toward the end of his life, detailing his family's experience of immigration following the genocide, next to *588 rue Paradis*, released a year later, in 1992.

Mother begins with footage of mount Ararat and the narration by what we would later learn to be the youngest – and only surviving – child of the Armenian family the movie is centered on, Azad Zakarian. Azad is the protagonist of the movie, narrating the story of his childhood and adolescence retroactively in voiceovers. The narration begins by Azad's

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[52] Ibid, 10.
[53] "Henri Verneuil Biography," IMDb, accessed August 15, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0894577/bio/?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.
[54] Frieze, "Three films, one genocide," 41.
[55] Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 15.

voiceover saying: “For many years, they called me the Armenian” before he starts recounting what it has historically meant to be Armenian.[56] This more general historical context is then supported by a scene depicting the assassination of Talaat Pasha by Soghomon Tehlirian and the trial following the assassination.[57] While the lawyer in German courts is asking the jury whether a man killing someone responsible for the atrocities against the Armenians can really be guilty, the picture fades into a scene of a newly arriving ship in Marseille, where we meet the family – Mayrig (which means “mother”) and Hagop, Azad’s parents, and Gayane and Anna, Mayrig’s sisters and Azad’s aunts –, as well as the family friend Apkar, who is expecting them already, for the first time.[58] Within the first fifteen minutes of the movie, the viewer is therefore positioned within the historical and political context of the Armenian genocide and its consequences that follow the family throughout the movie. At the same time, because the story is narrated by an adult Azad, the stamp of the French official “suspended in the air”[59] that will declare the family stateless is where Azad is pinpointing his first childhood memory.[60] While the movie – as well as Azad’s almost omniscient narration – therefore moves into the past frequently throughout the movie, this scene already sets the tone for a protagonist dealing with a past that, while informing every aspect of his life, is not quite his own.

A common theme throughout the movie remains Azad’s closeness to his family as well as frequent depictions of his separation from the stories they share with each other. When Azad’s father Hagop asks the family friend Apkar about the fate of his brothers that had been at the same place as Apkar at the beginning of the deportations, Mayrig is just about to put Azad to bed.[61] Azad’s bed, however, is just behind a room divider, which separates him from his family while still enabling him to listen to the stories. While the viewer watches a flashback of a brutal scene taking place during the genocide where Apkar is mutilated – explaining his limp throughout the movie – once the flashback ends, the camera pans on Azad, reading a book in bed and having listened to Apkar’s story in the background. The narrator then goes on to say that with the story, Apkar had “snatched [him] brutally away from the world of fairies,” and that, through the story, he had lost the innocence of his

[56] “mère (1991)/Mother/Mayrig (original)/Մայրիկ. En français. English, Spanish subtitles,” YouTube, video, 00:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVbJJwhHJfA.
[57] Ibid, 4:04-14:10.
[58] Ibid, 14:11.
[59] Ibid, 19:40.
[60] Ibid, 19:30.
[61] Ibid, 30:45.

childhood.[62] The picture of Azad behind some sort of divider, being in close proximity to his family, while not entirely being "in" on their conversations – and on their stories – is a recurring theme throughout especially the childhood sequences of the movie.[63] At one point, Azad, in an attempt to eavesdrop, even brings the physical divider in the apartment down.[64] The most poignant scene about this division between Azad's and his family's culture and history appears after the death of his aunt Anna. After learning of Anna's death, Azad runs into the kitchen to stare at the herbs that only she knew how to name and where to get, realizing that, with the death of his aunt, he had lost a piece of culture he would not be able to reconstruct. At the same time, Azad's personal experience remains, including Anna's voice scolding him.[65]

Azad appears to be continuously surrounded by the traces of genocide – be it in the physical trauma he observes in Apkar, the stories told when he is sitting behind the divider, or the loss of personal culture after his aunt's death – but he is not quite capable of fully grasping them. He *understands* that there is a rich history and meaning behind his family's religion, for example, as is shown in one scene where he is asked in school what religion he belongs to: the adult narrator goes on about the things his child self would have liked to say about his religion, that it is more ancient than the French Catholicism he is confronted with, that it is beautiful and connected to a lot of depth and meaning.[66] But instead, Azad the child says: "I am from the church who never speaks ill of other churches"[67] – and gets reprimanded for it. There is an idea of meaning-making, of engaging with the memory and legacy that surrounds him, but it takes the adult narrator Azad looking back at those traces to find the right words. As a child, he stumbles in trying to figure them out.

Throughout the movie, names, flashbacks, and other traces of the past related to the genocide are slowly allowing the viewer to put the pieces together, to understand – just like Azad slowly understands – where those memories fit in. We, for example, realize together with Azad's father that Apkar is disabled right after the family's arrival, but only learn what mutilation during the genocide has caused this later with the story Azad is listening to.[68] Or, in another instance, when Azad's aunt asks Apkar about a doctor she once knew at the

[62] Ibid, 32:45-43:43.
[63] Ibid, 52:40, 53:50.
[64] Ibid, 49:46.
[65] Ibid, 1:47:57.
[66] Ibid, 1:04:56
[67] Ibid, 1:05:46.
[68] Ibid, 18:24, 32:45.

beginning of the movie, the viewer does not understand until much later – like Azad too – that this doctor who got killed in a massacre Apkar survived was the person she loved and the reason she does not marry.[69] At one point in the movie, Azad is sneaking into the back of a cinema with a friend, but unable to enter, they can only listen to the movie, with the friend, who had already seen it, explaining to Azad what happened. This action of imagining while only having the sounds as an indication leaves such a lasting impression on Azad that he decides to become a filmmaker – something that his family thoroughly disagrees with.[70] The latter is an interesting scene, not only because Azad attributes huge importance to it in the movie, but also, and more importantly, because it relates closely to what the movie itself does. While *Mother* makes use of multiple flashback scenes related to the Armenian genocide and these scenes are attributed to a specific character in the movie remembering them, it is not the aunts of the parents or Akbar really imagining those scenes – it is Henri Verneuil, whose semi-autobiographical story as a second-generation survivor is being told here, constructing them. He is, in other words, just like Azad, listening in and trying to paint a picture that feels like it once existed just like that.

In comparison to *Ravished Armenia*, the way *Mother* engages with memories of the Armenian genocide can be closely related to Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. The memories of the Armenian genocide, as represented by Verneuil, are lingering throughout the story, waiting to be pieced together, and, ultimately, to be imagined by its protagonist. This filmic engagement with the Armenian genocide focusses less on painting what has happened – as *Ravished Armenia* does or, at least, claims to do – and more on the young protagonist who has not consciously witnessed the events himself, attempting to piece together the memories of his family members and Akbar to formulate his own ideas about the Armenian genocide. Just like in Hirsch's conceptualization of postmemory, Azad is "crowded out by them."[71]

Chapter 2: Mediated approaches to genocide in film during the 21st century

In 2015, reality television stars Kim and Khloé Kardashian boarded a plane. Together with their two cousins, Kim Kardashian's then-husband Kanye West, and her daughter North West, as well as a camera team filming for their show *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, the two sisters travelled to Armenia for what Kim would later call the most meaningful trip she had

[69] Ibid, 31:35, 1:19:50.
[70] Ibid, 1:26:51.
[71] Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 4.

ever been on.[72] Reality television is not usually thought of as a source for scholarly, yet alone historical, inquiry. And while there has been an increasing emphasis on the shift in television that reality television formats have brought about, public opinion, according to Alison Landsberg, is usually divided between those who see the format as a "tasteless, cynical exploitation of people's interest in becoming famous" and those who see it as a chance for increasing media democratization.[73] Reality television is a curious case of a documentary format that is supposed to give a viewer a better insight into the reality of people's lived experiences, yet edits very consciously for the sake of entertainment and dramatization.[74] At the same time, the genre is hugely popular, with thousands if not millions of viewers regularly tuning in to shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. What the viewers of the episodes "Mother Armenia" and "It Feels Good to be Home", respectively the 14th and 15th episode of the 10th season of Keeping Up With the Kardashians, did tune in for in 2015 was an on-camera engagement with the memory of the Armenian genocide that I will analyze next to the more traditional documentary *Aurora's Sunrise* (2022).

While all of the Kardashian siblings have been born and raised in the United States, the family's paternal line originates from Armenia. In flying to the country of their ancestors, the two sisters are fulfilling the lifelong dream of their late father, Robert Kardashian. Something that is clearly communicated throughout the episodes. In a confessional – a format in which a reality television star sits in front of a camera and retroactively comments on the events that have been filmed before, which is usually cut between scenes from the original recordings – at the beginning of the first episode, Kim talks about the importance of the trip to Armenia for their family, immediately mentioning the genocide's 100th anniversary as the reason for their visit.[75] Throughout the first few minutes of the episode, old photographs of the three Kardashian sisters with their father is cut, clearly emphasizing the strong personal connection they have to the Armenian culture.

Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory was specifically formulated to include rather than exclude people from empathizing with and connecting to a culture. The standpoint that prosthetic memory is therefore traditionally applied from is one of difference: people do not have a personal connection to a traumatic event, but through a mediatized

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[72] "S10 E15 It Feels Good to Be Home," Hayu, accessed August 15, 2023, video, 14:25, https://www.hayu.com/show/29519400306.
[73] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 2194-2208, Kindle.
[74] Ibid, 2234.
[75] "S10 E14 Mother Armenia," Hayu, accessed August 15, 2023, video, 3:00, https://www.hayu.com/show/29519400306.

experience, they form a strong emotional connection to an event which can inform their own subjective choices, for example when it comes to politics. Although the Kardashian's are descendants of Armenians who had fled the country because of the genocide, I will argue here that the temporal – and generational – space between the events of the genocide and the sisters' lived experience provides this distance that makes an individual relate on a strongly mediated rather than directly personal level. Within the first episode, this becomes particularly visible when the women arrive in Armenia: they are fascinated by the traditional clothes, food, and dances – precisely because it is so different from what they usually experience in Los Angeles.[76] While the food is something they recognize – and emphasize as an important part of the trip right from the beginning[77] – the preparation, for example, is completely new to them and something that they have a great interest in sharing with their half-sisters who do *not* have Armenian ancestry.[78] For the sisters, Armenia is something that they know about – because of their family's history – but it is clearly a place of difference. At the same time, at least for Kim, as her husband raps for a crowd during the second episode, it "feels good to be home" – clearly referring to Armenia.[79]

How do the sisters, and the show, then engage with the memory of the Armenian genocide? Watching the two episodes, what becomes clear is that while the genocide is continuously interwoven into the conversations between the sisters and their guests on screen, it is something that is clearly connected to materiality. Their conversations about the Armenian genocide are, for example, closely linked to the places they visit – Armenia as a whole, their ancestral home, and especially the genocide memorial. After the visit of the memorial, the women have the probably most heartfelt conversation on the entire trip, talking about what it means to erase someone's culture. For them, however, the empathic connection to this traumatic event is directly connected to being educated about the event themselves (visiting a memorial, talking with the director of the memorial) as well as taking concrete actions following them – in this case, in the form of social media posts (educating others on the Armenian genocide) as well as taking an explicit political stance with regard to the U.S.'s position of, at the time, non-acknowledgement of the genocide.[80]

This emphasis on materiality with generations further removed from traumatic events, that is so emphasized within the concept of prosthetic memory, becomes even clearer when

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[76] Ibid, 12:38.
[77] Ibid, 2:32.
[78] Hayu, "It Feels Good to Be Home," 1:47.
[79] Ibid, 8:32.
[80] Hayu, "Mother Armenia," 40:59.

looking at another example. After the rediscovery of video material from the original *Aurora's Sunrise* (1919), the material has been used to produce a variety of different films.[81] While early re-edits of the material have until now predominantly resulted in short clips for educational purposes, a 2022 production took a more elaborate approach: the documentary *Aurora's Sunrise* by Armenian director and producer Inna Sahakyan combines footage from the original *Ravished Armenia*, animation, photography, as well as interview footage of an old Aurora Mardiganian to tell about her experience of the Armenian genocide and her time in the U.S., doing relief work. The film thereby combines the material at multiple points so smoothly that the original film seamlessly cuts into animated sequences, creating an illusion of completion of the material. At the same time, because of the animated nature of the footage, it is clear what has been – literally – illustrated and what is real recorded footage of the movie and the interviews. The further the documentary goes on, however, the more difficult it becomes to realize when a cut is being made. While, at the beginning of the movie, cutting between different material is a new technique that a viewer is more likely to register, the more used someone becomes to the cuts throughout the documentary, the more seamlessly they all blend into one story. Whether a viewer is listening to and watching the interview with the real Mardiganian, or parts of the film *Ravished Armenia*, or an animation, the entire story weaves into a single storyline, telling the "true" story of Aurora Mardiganian – even though most of the footage used is, by definition, an artistic construction.

There are moments throughout the documentary where the animation style becomes especially experimental, usually connected to highly emotional moments in Mardiganian's life. The deaths of her family members are, for example, represented through a repetition of animated footage that first appeared at the beginning of the film, with Aurora and the remaining family members partaking in a play in their backyard. With every death of a family member, more people in a flashback of the play footage disappear and leave behind dyed pieces of red cloth, which increasingly cover the backyard, leaving behind an illusion of blood.[82] Later on, when Aurora is close to suffering a nervous breakdown in Hollywood, her isolation, exhaustion, and paranoia are also represented through experimental sequences of animated footage.[83] However, the documentary does not suffer from a decrease in realism because of this use of experimental animation. Because it represents how Mardiganian *feels*

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[81] Frieze, "Three films, one genocide," 48-51.
[82] "Aurora's Sunrise," Picl, accessed August 14, 2023, video, 9:24, 15:33, 17:22, 21:00, https://picl.nl/films/auroras-sunrise/.
[83] Ibid, 1:06:08, 1:07:01, 1:16:22, 1:16:55, 1:18:06.

in an abstract way, it becomes easier to relate to for a viewer of the documentary. Differently put: the documentary strongly plays on a viewer's empathy, something which Alison Landsberg connects closely to the emergence of mass culture.[84]

Aurora's Sunrise engages, through a conscious use of difference in material available, with the genocide in a way that is very aware of the subjective experience of history. Whether one watches the remaining footage of *Ravished Armenia*, reads the story that the movie is based on, watches the documentary footage, or the animation, or all those materials combined: it will always result in a different story. The documentary itself embraces this multitude of voices telling this specific individual story of Aurora Mardiganian, finding its truth somewhere in-between a patchwork of different sources. The director thereby is not only aware of the materiality through which the footage is filtered that results in this present version of the story – of Mardiganian and the Armenian genocide – she actively engages with it. This makes the approach *Aurora's Sunrise* is taking toward engagement with memory of the Armenian genocide probably the closest to Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. It is not only formed through but aware of mass culture and its role in memory construction. And, probably even more importantly, it opens the story up to an identification across cultures by employing scenes that play on a viewer's empathy. Instead of asking for *the* truth of Mardiganian's story or *the* truth of the Armenian genocide, it offers up one interpretation of what those events meant – and how people can continue to engage with their memory.

Conclusion

This paper set out with the question of how different generations of survivors of the Armenian genocide as well as their descendants compare in their engagement with the Armenian genocide through the medium of film. For this, I have looked, in the first part of my analysis, at the remaining footage of *Ravished Armenia* (1919), a film based on the story and featuring a survivor of the genocide, as well as *Mother* (1991), a film based on and directed by a second-generation survivor. In the second part of my analysis, I have then looked at two episodes of the reality television series *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* from 2015 as well as the 2022 documentary *Aurora's Sunrise*. Throughout this paper, I have applied the concepts of postmemory, especially in the first chapter when talking about the second-generation survivor engagement, and prosthetic memory, when talking about engagement in film of the 21st century. While I have found that the example in the survivor

[84] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 2273, Kindle.

generation was predominantly engaging with the genocide in a claim of representation how it has been, the second-generation survivor engagement took, instead, a more distanced approach to the event. Here, engagement with the genocide was predominantly one of discovery and attempt to find a personal connection to something that is overwhelmingly present but not quite a memory resulting from direct experience. This second form of engagement, I have argued, can reasonably be connected to Hirsch's concept of postmemory. In the second part of my analysis, I have instead found an increased distance to the genocide and, resulting from that, a focus on mediated approaches – either through visiting sites connected to the genocide or using the awareness of this distance to re-construct and re-interpret a story within an awareness of subjectivity. This, I have concluded, does resemble what Alison Landsberg has called a prosthetic memory.

Through this analysis, I have attempted to contribute a more extensive comparative perspective than the ones in present literature to, what I think, not only to be an interesting but also very important field of study. At the same time, there are many perspectives that would go beyond the scope of the present paper but that could be interesting to explore in the future. I have, for example, entirely omitted notions of gender in the present study. However, especially the gendered nature of memory transmission – especially looking at the Armenian genocide which has had, as evident from *Ravished Armenia*, a strong perspective on women from the beginning – would, I believe, be very interesting. Additionally, while I have analyzed a wide variety of different film across a time period spanning more than one-hundred years, there are many films engaging with topics of the Armenian genocide that I have not talked about. I have, for example, focused largely on Western productions and have not engaged with Soviet cinema, which is historically very different. It would be interesting to see whether the concepts I have applied can hold up in different cultural contexts.

I have started this paper with the question of Elie Wiesel on how we remember, especially when the object of remembrance is inherently incomprehensible. There is, as has been my argument throughout this paper, not a singular answer to that question. Remembering is an activity. It changes over time and generations and it is rarely straight-forward. But, as Wiesel says, remember we must.

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