



Chapitre de livre

2015

Accepted version

Open Access

This is an author manuscript post-peer-reviewing (accepted version) of the original publication. The layout of the published version may differ .

Ravished Armenia (1919): Bearing witness in the age of mechanical reproduction. Some thoughts on a film-ordeal

Garibian, Sévane

How to cite

GARIBIAN, Sévane. Ravished Armenia (1919): Bearing witness in the age of mechanical reproduction. Some thoughts on a film-ordeal. In: Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians : One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation. Chabot, Joceline ; Godin, Richard ; Kappler, Stefanie ; Kasparian, Sylvia (Ed.). Basingstoke : Palgrave Mcmillan, 2015. p. 36–50. (Palgrave Studies in the History of Genocide) doi: 10.1007/978-1-137-56402-3_3

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:77313>

Publication DOI: [10.1007/978-1-137-56402-3_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-56402-3_3)

Chapter 2 *

***Ravished Armenia* (1919): Bearing witness in the age of mechanical reproduction. Some thoughts on a film-ordeal.**

Sévane Garibian (Universities of Geneva and Neuchâtel, Switzerland) ***

[‘(...) *le mirage a cessé ; je recommence à me ressembler*’
Robert Antelme¹]

Introduction

The challenges raised by genocides and by the multiple forms of testimony which narrate, translate, process, represent and bring them, so to speak, *into the present*, are considerable². Given these difficulties, a return to the writings of Walter Benjamin proves useful insofar as these contain tools vital for the construction of a non-linear thought-process, one which is ‘awake,’ aware of its own fragmented, de-systematised reflection³. In this article we set out to establish a dialogue between two of his most important works—*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1939) (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 211-244) and *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) (Benjamin, 1973/1940: 245-255) —by considering a truly extraordinary film. Although barely known, if not entirely forgotten, this film nevertheless carries within it the seeds—*avant la lettre*—of the Benjaminian concept of a ‘cinematic history’, of the cinema as a potential mode of ‘historical awakening’⁴. A film which can be seen as both a simulacrum and a revelation.

Ravished Armenia, first shown in 1919 in the immediate aftermath of the Armenian genocide of 1915 which it portrays, would undertake its own cross-border odyssey⁵. This American film, which was already lost by the 1920s, would re-emerge in France in the possession of Yervant Setian, an exiled survivor of the genocide living in Marseille. Having been inspired, it appears, to become a projectionist and documentary-maker following the immense impact the film made on him when he saw it in a Marseillais cinema in 1925, he would, thirteen years later, stumble across a print of the film minus its title sequence. It was by then in the possession of a distributor by the name of George Miller, lying forgotten at the bottom of a box marked *Martyrdom of a People*,

* This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article published in Joceline CHABOT *et al.*, *Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians : One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2015, pp. 36-50.

along with the explanation that the film was based on the testimony of a woman named either Elisa Greyterian or Elsa Kederian.

Although neither the name of the film nor that of the witness upon whose testimony the script was meant to be based correspond to *Ravished Armenia*, Setian was absolutely positive; when he sat down and watched the images in the company of Miller at number 5, rue des Petites Écuries, he declared that he was able to recognise and identify them as belonging to the film he had seen in 1925 in Marseille. After probably paying somewhat over the odds to purchase the print, he would subsequently take it with him when he was repatriated to Armenia in 1947⁶. On his arrival, only one reel remained (equating to fifteen minutes out of a total of, more or less, eighty-five minutes), as the others had mysteriously disappeared en route between the port of Batum (Georgia) and Yerevan (Armenia). This short extract, miraculously saved by Setian at the end of the 1930s would be rediscovered in 1994 in Yerevan by Eduardo Kozanlian, an Armenian living in Argentina. It was in this same year that Kozanlian, who had been searching for the film for many years, discovered the existence not only of the extract from *Ravished Armenia* (in the National Archives) but also of Yervant Setian, whom he met around the same time and whose story, briefly reproduced here, he would hear⁷. Setian, nicknamed Cine Seto, would die in Yerevan on 26 January 1997, having lived there continuously since his repatriation in 1947⁸.

The short extract is now available on DVD through a network of cinema enthusiasts, and may also be seen in the Armenian capital in the Museum of the Genocide⁹. Two other DVDs using the same footage with different editing and audio techniques are in circulation¹⁰. To this day, no trace has been found of the rest of the film¹¹.

The few remaining images/traces of what was the first cinematic reconstitution of a genocide narrated by a female survivor testify in themselves to two things: both to the Catastrophe, through their screening of the body as witness in the form of Aurora Mardigianian, a survivor of the massacres here playing herself, and to the value of the Benjaminian approach to history in the age of mechanical reproduction.

The ‘message in a bottle’¹²

Ravished Armenia, also entitled *Auction of Souls*, is the only film of its kind, being based on the

testimony of the young Aurora Mardiganian (real name Archaluys Mardigian)¹³, who escaped to exile in the United States on 5 November 1917, aged sixteen¹⁴. The script for this (silent) film was written by Nora Waln¹⁵ and Harvey Gates¹⁶, the editors of Aurora's memoirs, which were published at Gates' insistence. The translation and transcription of her testimony—told in Armenian and simultaneously translated by an anonymous interpreter before being retranscribed by Gates—were the result of a remarkable series of coincidences. While looking for her brother, from whom she had become separated during their escape, Aurora was initially taken in by an Armenian family who put out a series of ads in the press to help her in her search. As a result of these ads, Aurora was interviewed by the *Sun* and the *Tribune* in New York. It was through reading these interviews that husband and wife Harvey and Eleanor Gates became aware of this survivor's story and, realising the potential draw of her gripping tale, they decided to publish her account, which would form the basis of the film script. It was at this point that the couple decided to rename her 'Aurora Mardiganian' so as to Americanise her first name and change her family name—the young woman had flatly refused to *occidentalise* the latter. Her memoir was first published in 1918 with the title *Ravished Armenia* by Kingfield Press in New York and subsequently, in 1919, with the title *Auction of Souls* by Odhams Press in London. It was reprinted in 1934, and sold a total of 360,000 copies. The memoir was also translated all over the world.

The film was produced by a pioneer of American cinema, William N. Selig¹⁷, on behalf of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (a charitable organisation which would become the Near East Foundation in 1930)¹⁸. The charity was formed in 1915, in large part due to the calls for action from Henry Morgenthau (the serving American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire since 1913 and eyewitness to the genocide). It aimed to raise the funds necessary to help Armenian refugees and orphans from Turkey¹⁹. The film was shot in record time (less than a month) and featured a star cast, Hollywood sets and hundreds of extras. Almost all of them were members of the Armenian community in the United States, and among them were two hundred orphans from the genocide who had sought refuge in America. Last, but not least, at the top of the bill was Aurora herself who, for the derisory sum of fifteen dollars a week²⁰, played herself²¹ fleeing from a desert specially constructed for this purpose in the Selig Studios in Edendale, the cradle of the silent cinema.

The film premiered at the Los Angeles Alexandria Hotel on 15 January 1919²². Initially presented as a cinematic work with a charitable objective, namely to inform and to raise public awareness, and bring in funds needed to help refugees, *Ravished Armenia* was above all a blockbuster. It was designed to create a commercial sensation amidst which the original witness, dispossessed of her own story, would be entirely lost. The publicity organised before each screening focused on three clear thematic axes, carefully selected to whet audiences' appetites to the film's sensationalist aspects, namely sex, religion and truth. Much was made of the remarkable nature of this epoch-making film²³. And it was indeed remarkable, in terms not only of its contents (its subject, in particular sexual violence, with the abuse and trafficking of Christian women forming the film's principal *leitmotiv*, as suggested by its lurid title) but also of its form (a script based on the testimony of an eyewitness who is actually seen acting out her own experiences not long after the events in question).

Its tagline 'the Christian girl who survived the great massacres' promised not only thrilling sensation but also authenticity ('a sensational story of Turkish depravity', 'every word is truth!')²⁴. Nothing in this publicity campaign was left to chance. No opportunity was missed to underline the fact that the heroine is reliving, on screen, the atrocities that she had already had to go through again in producing the oral narrative of her testimony ('every stirring scene through which Aurora lives in the book, is lived again on the motion picture screen'), nor to insist upon the 'seal of truth' provided by the parallel testimony of American and British diplomats serving in the Ottoman Empire at the time of these events which corroborates Aurora's story (it was even claimed that the US ambassador Henry Morgenthau appeared on screen)²⁵. Particular attention was drawn to the physical presence of the protagonist herself in theatres during the film's promotional tour, as demanded by the producers—an element considered so important that when, having become seriously depressed, she was no longer able to appear herself, seven doubles were hired to stand in for her and *be there in her place*, without audiences' knowledge (Slide, 1997: 16). Everything was staged down to the last detail.

'SEE AURORA, HERSELF, IN HER STORY' trumpeted, in bold capitals, one publicity poster. And it worked. The screenings were successful, and a stream of articles and reviews appeared. From this point of view, it was a success: the testimony of the young woman who was now known as 'the Joan of Arc of Armenia' was widely circulated thanks to its reconstitution in images, which had

the unique ability to make the original trauma *present* (both visually and temporally) through Oscar Apfel's directing skills²⁶.

The operation was effective, but left no space for Aurora. She became lost in this process. The sea into which her bottle had been thrown was a public, cinematographic space, in the age of mechanical reproduction, as Benjamin would say. A space that would crush her. This experience serves to illustrate all of the risks involved in the telling, processing and representation of the Catastrophe. The truth told by the witness, once it is handed over, is changed in order to be made visible, *showable*, credible when, that is, it is not censored²⁷. This may be seen in the final sequence of the film which, although it was considered shocking at the time (it was cut entirely in England) and was certainly successful in its aim of achieving a sensational effect, was nevertheless a significantly altered version of a far crueller reality. The scene showing the crucified women, whose nakedness is partially concealed by their long black hair, is the result of a compromise later denounced by Aurora as an inauthentic and watered-down version of the systematic infliction of rape and impalement²⁸. It is interesting to note though that, at the time of the film's release, sexual abuse and systematic rape was just beginning to be taken into consideration as a distinct form of mass crime in the context of the post-war Paris Peace Conference²⁹.

Instrumentalised, reified, terrified by a cathartic filming process that left her scarred both physically (she was made to carry on filming despite having broken her ankle in an on-set accident) and psychologically (in particular through the damaging effect of the hyperreality of certain traumatising reconstructions) (Avagyan, 2012), Aurora withdrew permanently from the public scene and exchanged her involuntary stardom for a long period of silence. This was probably a way of 'working on' her (second?) survival³⁰ as others work on their well-being. She married in 1929 and gave birth to a son named after her husband, Martin. She would die, alone in a Los Angeles hospital on 6 February 1994—the year of the discovery of *Ravished Armenia's* remaining images in Yerevan. Her unclaimed body was cremated. According to Californian law, her ashes were buried four years later in an unmarked grave. On 17 December 1988, she had ended one of her (very rare) interviews given to the cinema historian Anthony Slide with the words 'I hope [...] you will be the one who will bring out the real truth of my life' (Slide, 1997:

18).

The grain of sand which explains the desert

What remains after deliverance? By bringing it so close, the film killed the Aur(or)a³¹, to cite the Benjaminian idea that mechanical reproduction destroys the authenticity of what it transmits, owing to ‘the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction’ (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 217). It matters little, philosopher Marc Nichanian would say, as *the witness was already dead*. For is the very essence of any genocidal process not the death of the witness through annihilation? A witness who speaks is never a witness in the full sense³², as s/he can in reality speak only of the impossibility of bearing witness (Agamben, 1999) and of the impossibility of speaking about the Catastrophe as a *fact*³³.

To her personal cost, Aurora, by ‘represent[ing her]self to the public before the camera’ (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 222), became an infinitely reproducible accessory: ‘she was actually to copy a copy of herself, giving birth to an extraordinary icon’ (Avagyan, 2012). Benjamin would refer to this very process: ‘for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura’, the latter being impossible to reproduce (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 223)³⁴. Through her image, and also through the bodies of other women (the seven look-alikes) brought on to take her place, Aurora became multiple, a commercial product. It was this extreme, abusive *ordeal*, involving a brutal translation of her memory and testimony, that the Canadian filmmaker of Armenian origin Atom Egoyan and the Turkish video artist Kutlug Ataman brought into focus when they were inspired by her story to collaborate in the joint creation of the video installation entitled *Auroras/Testimony*, shown in 2007 in Toronto and then Istanbul. The first piece stages seven Auroras, actresses appearing on seven screens arranged in a circle around the audience, reciting seven extracts from Aurora Mardiganian’s memoirs. Their monologues alternatively follow on from or overlap one another, complementing or competing with each other. A second piece consisted of the projection of an

interview conducted by Ataman with a centenarian lady who had been the nursemaid both to him and to his father and who, as he would only discover much later, was a survivor of the genocide of 1915. Confronted with the photographs and questions relating to her past presented to her by the artist, she can remember nothing; her memory has gone (Avagyan, 2012).

Yet despite all this, Aurora did address her story to a worldwide audience, this ‘absent-minded [...] examiner’ who nevertheless remains the receiver who guarantees the ‘testimonial pact of reception’³⁵ without which the testimony cannot be delivered. The specific historical period in question, quite apart from the issue of reproductibility, is far from incidental in this respect: the context of the (more or less favorable) reception of her testimony and its temporal aspects are important in a number of different ways.

First of all, it is important to emphasise that the national context within which Aurora’s testimony was given, that of the United States, was initially receptive to the denunciation of the policy of extermination carried out by the Ottoman Empire against its Armenian minority. Although the United States refused to sign the joint allied declaration of 24 May 1915 by France, Great Britain and Russia which solemnly condemned the ‘new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilisation’³⁶, this event nonetheless made the front page of that day’s *New York Times* under the headline ‘Allies to Punish Turks Who Murder’³⁷. The media had got hold of the genocide, which was immediately brought into the American public sphere, greatly assisting the subsequent reception of testimony—the *New York Times* alone would publish one hundred and forty-five articles on the subject in the course of 1915 (Power, 2003: 5). In late 1918, the filming of *Ravished Armenia*, soon after the publication of Aurora’s memoirs in New York, coincided with a presidential proclamation (on 29 November 1918) which asked American citizens to contribute to a thirty-million-dollar fund to support homeless Armenian refugees. However, as Shushan Avagyan has pointed out, it is also important to recognise that the “domesticated” translation of this testimony, whether in textual form or on screen, along with its wide dissemination, bears the mark of the American evangelical movement and of a genre inherited from the Christian anti-slavery crusade³⁸. It ‘was not unusual for Hollywood in its formative years to produce films on “distant places and eras [...] as part of a broader attempt to elevate the cultural legitimacy of the motion picture industry”’ (Frieze, 2014: 42)³⁹. Finally, Benedetta Guerzoni shows how Aurora

Mardiganian's case illustrates more generally the ideological representation of Armenian women in the international media, in particular in the United States, immediately after the end of the Great War as part of the war mood, following Orientalist stereotypes (Guerzoni, in this volume, Chapter 3).

Added to this, Aurora's story was being told at the same time as, on the other side of the world, the victors were writing the official history. The first screening of *Ravished Armenia* took place in America on 15 January 1919, three days before the start of the Paris Peace Conference, which would lead to the drawing up of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, where the terms of peace between Turkey and the Allies would be decided. This treaty envisaged the setting-up of an international court to judge those responsible for the 'massacres' of the Armenians. This would have been a first for international law, but the plan never came to fruition⁴⁰. Yet what it had set in motion was truly groundbreaking: the work done at this time laid the foundations for what would become, a quarter of a century later, the new law relating to crimes against humanity by which the Nazi war criminals would be judged at Nuremberg. The intervening period, however, would see the rapid removal of the Armenian question from the international spotlight from the early 1920s onwards, coinciding both with the mysterious disappearance of the film and, let us not forget, the beginning of the Turkish government's policy of denial (Garibian, 2009: 95).

Lastly, *Ravished Armenia* was shot and then screened at the very same time that two parallel processes were under way in Turkey. On the one hand were the appeals that were published in Armenian newspapers asking for any documents, evidence and eyewitness testimony that could be used to help reconstruct 'our History', following the surrender of the Ottoman Empire in 1918⁴¹. On the other was the destruction in parallel of a large part of the archives of the *Ittihad ve Tiraki* (Union and Progress) party, the liberal nationalist Young-Turk movement that had perpetrated the genocide, just as preparations were being made for the Constantinople trials of 1919-1920⁴²—a prelude to the policy of systematic denial that was put in place by Kemalist Turkey in 1920 and to which subsequent governments have adhered to this day with unflinching loyalty.

From this point onwards, 'testimony (*vgayoutioun*) was destined to become evidence (*pasd*)'

(Beledian, 2009: 111)⁴³. Aurora's testimony, like that of so many others, obeys the imperative that marks the inevitable transition from living memory to archived memory decried with such feeling by Nichanian⁴⁴: 'for the last 90 years, by proving, by making testimony work as evidence, I have been obeying the will of the perpetrator. He holds me in his grasp' (Nichanian, 2006: 211-212)⁴⁵. This is the catastrophe of the survivor, who becomes 'living proof of his own death' and for whom 'testimony is shame'⁴⁶.

In this context, Aurora does offer, in spite of everything, another voice. A voice which would allow us to 'brush history against the grain' (Benjamin, 1973/1940: 248), to apprehend it from the point of view of the vanquished, to escape, if only in the smallest measure, from the historical powerlessness of which Nichanian speaks (Nichanian, 2003). The young woman's narrative represents a history fragment constructed by the oppressed (Benjamin, 1973/1940: 248), picked up in this case by the cinema, a medium that presupposes the absolute necessity of reproducibility: 'Mechanical reproduction is inherent in the very technique of film production. This technique not only permits in the most direct way but virtually causes mass distribution' (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 237). This becomes all the more interesting when one considers that, for Benjamin, the cinema is useful for history as a tool of transformation. Indeed, it is precisely with reproductibility, and the corresponding loss of aura, that the work of art acquires a *political function*, an exhibition-value: 'the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics' (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 218)⁴⁷.

The cinema and the film-*ordeal Ravished Armenia* might be of use to history insofar as they are tools of awakening in the struggle against passivity. By widening the world of the visible, they provide a 'deepening of apperception', that is to say of perception accompanied by reflection and awareness⁴⁸: 'The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses' (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 230). Indeed, according to the Benjaminian ideal, there would no longer be any need to tell, merely to *show*, for the image is absolutely central to his concept of history: 'The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (Benjamin, 1973/1940: 247).

An angel whose wings were caught in the storm, Aurora, like the famous *Angelus Novus* by Paul

Klee, also referred to by Benjamin, was the definitive embodiment of the link between Progress and Catastrophe⁴⁹. Her story allows us to understand the profound intertwining of modernity with barbarism that lay at the heart of Benjamin's thought⁵⁰. A body of thought which can not only, perhaps, go some way to saving the witness, but also help us to break free from *acedia*, that 'indolence of the heart' which 'despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly' (Benjamin, 1973/1940: 248).

Bibliography

- 'Allies to Punish Turks Who Murder' (24 May 1915), *New York Times* (newspaper): p.1.
- Near-East relief activities regarding the Armenian refugees* (1981/1922) (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud).
- 'A noventa años de "Armenia violada" y "Subasta de almas"' (4 March 2009) *Sardarabad* (newspaper): p. 8.
- 'El Museo del Genocidio emitió una tarjeta postal en su conmemoración', *Armenia* (newspaper), 5 March 2009, p. 5.
- Adalian, R. P. (2003) 'L'ambassadeur Morgenthau et l'élaboration de la politique américaine de protestation et d'intervention contre le génocide', *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, n° 177-178 : 425-435.
- Agamben, G. (1999) *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz : l'archive et le témoin* (trans. Pierre Alfieri) (Paris : Payot et Rivages).
- Alloa, E. and S. Kristensen (eds) (2014) *Témoignage et survivance* (Genève : Métis Presses)
- Altounian, J. (2009) 'Parcours d'un écrit de survivant jusqu'à son inscription psychique, ou temporalité d'élaboration d'un héritage traumatique', in Altounian, Vahram and Janine (eds.) *Mémoires du génocide arménien. Héritage traumatique et travail analytique* (Paris : PUF).
- Arnoux, R. (2004) *Arménie 1947: les naufragés de la terre promise* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud).
- Avagyan, S. (2012) 'Becoming Aurora: Translating the Story of Arshaluys Mardiganian', *Dissidences. Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism*, vol. 4, n° 8, article 13, accessible online at <http://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences/vol4/iss8/13>.
- Becker, A. and O. Debary (eds.) (2012) *Montrer les violences extrêmes : théoriser, créer, historiciser, muséographier* (Grane : Créaphis Editions).
- Beledian, K. (2009) 'Traduire un témoignage écrit dans la langue des autres', in Altounian, Vahram and Janine (eds.) *Mémoires du génocide arménien. Héritage traumatique et travail analytique* (Paris: PUF).
- Benjamin, W. (1973/1939) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (trans. by Harry Zohn) (London: Fontana): 211-244.

Benjamin, W. (1973/1940) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations* (trans. by Harry Zohn) (London: Fontana): 245-255.

Bregent-Heald, D. (2010) 'Women in between: Filmic Representations of Gender, Race, and Nation in *Ramona* (1910) and *The Barrier* (1917) during the Progressive Era', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 31, n° 2: 145-176.

Bryce, J. and A. J. Toynbee (2005/1916) *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (1915-1916)* (London: Taderon Press).

Dadrian, V. (1995) *Autopsie du génocide arménien* (trans. Marc & Mikaël Nichanian) (Brussels : Complexe).

Dadrian, V. and T. Akcam (2011) *Judgment at Istanbul, The Armenian Genocide Trials* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books).

Frieze, D.-L. (2014) 'Three films, one genocide. Remembering the Armenian Genocide through *Ravished Armenia(s)*', in Eltringham, Nigel & Maclean, Pam (eds.), *Remembering Genocide* (New York: Routledge): 38-53.

Garibian, S. (2009) *Le crime contre l'humanité au regard des principes fondateurs de l'État moderne. Naissance et consécration d'un concept* (Geneva, Paris, Brussels, Schulthess : LGDJ, Bruylant).

Garibian, S. (2010) 'From the 1915 Allied Joint Declaration to the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres: Back to an International Criminal Law in Progress', *Armenian Review*, vol. 52, n° 1-2: 86-103.

Guerzoni, B. (2013) *Cancellare un popolo. Immagini e documenti del genocidio armeno* (Milano: Mimesis).

Kévonian, D. (2005) 'Photographie, génocide et transmission: l'exemple arménien', *Les Cahiers de la Shoah*, n° 8/1: 119-149.

Kevorkian, R. (2003) 'La Turquie face à ses responsabilités. Le procès des criminels Jeunes-Turcs (1918-1920)', *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, n° 177-178 : 166-205.

Kozanlian, E. (14 October 1998) 'Les ojos de *Cine Seto*', *Armenia* (newspaper).

Kozanlian, E. (19 May 1999) 'A propósito del libro 'Subasta de almas'', *Armenia* (newspaper).

Lowy, M. (2003-4) 'Progrès et catastrophe. La conception de l'histoire de Walter Benjamin', *Historien*.

Mascolo, D. (1987) *Autour d'un effort de mémoire. Sur une lettre de Robert Antelme* (Paris : Maurice Nadeau).

Matioossian, V. (15 April 2014) 'The Quest for Aurora: On 'Ravished Armenia' and its Surviving Fragment', *The Armenian Weekly*.

Mclagan, M. (2006) 'Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 108, n°1: 191-195.

- Morgenthau, H. (2010/1918) *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing).
- Nichanian, M. (2003) 'De l'archive. La honte', in Coquio, Catherine (ed.), *L'histoire trouée. Négation et témoignage* (Nantes: L'Atalante).
- Nichanian, M. (2006) *La perversion historiographique. Une réflexion arménienne* (Paris: Lignes).
- Nichanian, M. (2006) *La révolution nationale* (Geneva: MétisPresses).
- Power, S. (2003) 'A Problem from Hell'. *America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Perennial).
- Rodogno, D. (2014) Beyond Relief: A Sketch of the Near East Relief's Humanitarian Operations, 1918-1929, *Monde(s)*, 2(6): 45-64.
- Rollet, S. (2011) *Une éthique du regard* (Paris: Hermann)
- Sanchez, M. (21 April 1996) 'Imágenes mudas de Armenia', *Clarín* (newspaper).
- Schwartz, V. R. (2001) 'Walter Benjamin for Historians', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 106, n° 5: 1721-1743.
- Slide, A. (1996) *The Silent Feminists: America's First Women Directors* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press).
- Slide, A. (1997) *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press).
- Torchin, Leshu (2006) 'Ravished Armenia: Visual Media, Humanitarian Advocacy, and the Formation of Witnessing Publics', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 108, n° 1: 214-220.
- Waintrater, Régine (2009) 'Quand vivre est tout le sacré', in Altounian, Vahram and Janine (eds.), *Mémoires du génocide arménien. Héritage traumatique et travail analytique* (Paris: PUF).

** I wish to express my warm thanks to Eduardo Kozanlian for the interview he kindly agreed to give me, as well as for the trust and great generosity he has shown me. My thanks also go to Hayk Demoyan (Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan) for the ongoing discussions shared with him. I am grateful to Vincent Fontana for his careful re-reading of my text, and to Jonathan Hensher for his translation of this paper initially written in French.

¹ ‘(...) the illusion is over; I am beginning to resemble myself once more.’ Extract from a letter to Dionys Mascolo (21 June 1945). (Mascolo, 1987: 13-18)

² The academic literature on this topic is very rich. See for example, recently: Rollet (2011); Becker and Debarry (2012); Alloa & Kristensen (2014).

³ Michael Löwy has argued that, in this sense, ‘Benjamin has no philosophical system: his thinking only ever takes the form of the essay or the fragment – when, that is, it does not consist simply of quotations, passages torn out of their original context to be pressed into service within his own practice’ (*‘il n’y a pas, chez Benjamin, de système philosophique : toute sa réflexion prend la forme de l’essai ou du fragment – quand ce n’est pas de la citation pure et simple, les passages arrachés à leur contexte étant mis au service de sa démarche propre’*). (Lowy, 2003-4 : 199)

⁴ These expressions are borrowed from Vanessa Ruth Schwartz (2001).

⁵ The film was shown principally in the United States, Great Britain and France, but also in Latin America, in Cuba and Mexico, as well as Argentina (the first screening in Buenos Aires took place at the Callao cinema, 1 September 1920).

⁶ 1947 saw the repatriation of a number of Armenians from the diaspora of genocide survivors to Soviet Armenia following an appeal made by Stalin immediately after the defeat of Nazi Germany. In total, more than 5,000 French Armenians would set off for this homeland (see Arnoux, 2004).

⁷ The events described in the paragraphs above were related to us by Eduardo Kozanlian during an interview conducted in Buenos Aires on 8 November 2010. They have also featured in several press articles in Argentina which reproduce his account: Sanchez (1996: 10-11); Kozanlian (1999: 7); ‘A noventa años de ‘Armenia violada’ y ‘Subasta de almas’’, *Sardarabad*,

4 March 2009, p. 8; ‘El Museo del Genocidio emitió una tarjeta postal en su conmemoracion’, *Armenia*, 5 March 2009, p. 5.

⁸ He worked as a projectionist for the Armenian Hayfilm studios and is said to have made a number of documentary films: see the tribute written by Eduardo Kozaian published following Yervant Setian’s death entitled ‘Los ojos de *Cine Seto*’ (Cine Seto’s eyes), in the newspaper *Armenia*, 14 October 1998, p. 5.

⁹ See <http://www.genocide-museum.am>. It is important to note that the twenty-minute film on show at the museum alongside a selection of documentation relating to the film, press cuttings and personal documents belonging to Eduardo Kozaian, is a montage produced by Setian in Armenia and titled *Der Zor* (in which he added archive footage from the First World War, seen in the opening minutes of the extract). The fate of the original film and its trajectory remain a mystery and are subject to various interpretations. For a synthesis, see Matiossian (2014).

¹⁰ For developments, see Frieze (2014: 38-53).

¹¹ The Selig collection in the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences includes some documentary material relating to the filming, script and subtitles. The archives of the Near East Foundation (see below) were almost entirely destroyed by fire in 1964.

¹² Janine Altounian has used these words (‘la bouteille à la mer’) to describe the deportation diary kept by her father, Vahram Altounian, which retraces the ordeal of the Armenian Catastrophe (Altounian 2009: 114).

¹³ *Archaluys*, in Armenian, means *aurora* (in the sense of dawn).

¹⁴ These biographical details, as well as the information regarding the making of the film and the publicity campaign, are taken from the only book devoted solely to *Ravished Armenia*, written by the British cinema historian Anthony Slide (a silent cinema specialist, author of, notably, *The Silent Feminists: America’s First Women Directors* published in 1996), who was fortunate enough to meet Aurora Mardiganian and her son. The book contains an introduction written by the author, followed by the text of Aurora’s memoirs, along with photographs and documentary material. See Slide (1997).

¹⁵ As secretary of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, Nora Waln took care of Aurora when she first arrived in the United States.

¹⁶ Harvey Gates had been working in the American cinema industry since 1912 as a scriptwriter. His last script would be for *Flashing Guns* in 1947.

¹⁷ In 1896, Selig had set up one of the first cinema production companies, the Selig Polyscope Company, in Chicago. *Ravished Armenia* would be its last production.

¹⁸ See notably *Near-East relief activities regarding the Armenian refugees* (1981). See also Rodogno (2014).

¹⁹ For details of the numerous strongly-worded memoranda sent by Morgenthau to President Wilson, and his description at the time of these mass killings as ‘race murder’, see Power (2003: 5). See also Adalian (2004 : 425-435).

²⁰ By way of comparison, two Hollywood stars of the time, Helene Chadwick and Mary Pickford, were earning 2,000 and 10,000 dollars per week respectively. The average wage of a manual worker was between 15 and 20 dollars per week.

²¹ In the twenty-minute extract currently available, *Aurora* appears at 05:54 minutes.

²² Slide (1997: 12), where the author lists all the initial society screenings of the film.

²³ ‘I hope that five million people may see this picture and that every one of those five million people may go away stirred by this tremendous tragedy. They must see it as a thing of magnitude. We have a chance here to make a picture that will be epoch-making. We want to have in it an appeal to the mass, as well as to presidents and kings’ (statement by Harvey Gates, reproduced in Slide, 1997: 10).

²⁴ These phrases, collected in Anthony Slide’s book, are all taken from trailers shown before screenings.

²⁵ See in particular the famous accounts given by Morgenthau (2010/1918) and Bryce (2005/1916).

²⁶ An American actor and director, Apfel is famous for having co-directed *The Squaw Man*, the first feature film shot in Hollywood, with Cecil B. DeMille in 1914.

²⁷ The remarks made by the judge in Philadelphia who overturned the decision to censor the film by the Pennsylvania Censorship Board are most interesting in this context, as they emphasise the educational nature of the images in question: ‘There is nothing in the scenes which makes them sacrilegious, obscene, indecent or immoral, or of such nature as to tend to debase or corrupt morals. Viewing the picture as a whole, the court finds as a fact that it is *educational in character*’ (reproduced in Slide (1997: 11); emphasis added).

²⁸ Slide reproduces her account: ‘The Turks didn’t make their crosses like that. The Turks made little pointed crosses. They took the clothes off the girls. They made them bend down. And after raping them, they made them sit on the pointed wood, through the vagina. That’s the way they killed – the Turks’ (Slide, 1997: 6).

²⁹ ‘Abuses against the honour of women’ featured on the list of acts constituting ‘crimes against the laws of humanity’ drawn up in the report of 5 March 1919 as part of the Paris Peace Conference (see Garibian, 2009: 88 and 2010: 90). Today, the Statute of the International Criminal Court expressly includes sexual crimes within its definition of a crime against humanity (article 7 of the Statute of 1998).

³⁰ ‘[T]ravailler à sa survie’. (Beledian, 2009 : 108).

³¹ On Benjamin’s concept of *aura*, see Benjamin (1973/1939: 214).

³² ‘We know that there is no such thing as complete testimony, and that no account can fully convey the “demolition of a man”, to use Primo Levi’s famous expression’ (*‘Nous savons qu’il n’y a pas de témoignage intégral, et qu’aucun récit ne peut totalement rendre compte de la “démolition d’un homme”, selon l’expression célèbre de Primo Lévi’*) (Waintrater, 2009 : 160-161).

³³ Genocide, Marc Nichanian has written, is not a fact, but rather the destruction (or retention) of fact; and the destruction of the fact is the death of the witness. (See in particular Nichanian, 2006).

³⁴ Here Benjamin refers to Luigi Pirandello, who spoke of the actor being ‘in exile’ and of how ‘his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence’ (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 222-223).

³⁵ ‘[P]acte testimonial de réception’. (Waintrater, 2009 : 154).

³⁶ For a discussion of this declaration, which marked the first official appearance of the concept of ‘crime against humanity’ in the context of international law, and an examination of the American attitude towards this issue, see Garibian (2009: 82 and 2010).

³⁷ *New York Times*, 24 May 1915, p. 1.

³⁸ See the analysis of this point in Avagyan (2012).

³⁹ Quoting Bregent-Heald (2010: 146). See also Frieze (2014: 44) on the emphasis on the sexual violence on women in the film, as well as Torchin (2006: 214-220), Mclagan (2006: 191-195) and Guerzoni's contribution in this volume (Chapter 3).

⁴⁰ For an examination of this question and an analysis of the American position during the debates regarding the Armenian question at the Paris Peace Conference, see Garibian (2009: 87 and 2010).

⁴¹ 'The Armenian martyrdom must be proved' (*'Il faut prouver le martyre arménien'*) was the headline in one Constantinople-based Armenian newspaper on 22 November 1918 (this request, sent out by the Relief Committee for Deportees, was addressed directly to survivors and included a detailed questionnaire which laid out the template for the majority of testimony from this period). Krikor Beledian has pointed out that 'at the end of the request one encounters a short phrase slipped into the text without any further explanation: "Replies must be written in an incisive (*gdroug*) manner and without unnecessary ornamentation (*ansetheveth*)"' (*'à la fin de l'appel, on peut lire une petite phrase glissée dans le texte sans aucune explication: "Les réponses doivent être écrites d'une manière incisive (gdroug) et sans fioritures (ansetheveth)"'*) (Beledian, 2009: 111).

⁴² For a discussion of these trials, see Dadrian (1995) and Kevorkian (2003 : 166-205) (in this article the author shows the extent to which these trials, although undeniably important from a historical point of view, essentially sought to 'avoid either bringing the mass murders too overtly into the public arena or making any reference to the victim group by name, and to carry out all debate on ground that had been thoroughly prepared by the perpetrators in order to justify their acts' (*'d'éviter à la fois de mettre trop directement sur la place publique les meurtres de masse, de mentionner nommément le groupe victime et de placer les débats sur un terrain préalablement préparé par les bourreaux pour justifier leurs actes'*). See also Dadrian & Akcam (2011).

⁴³ '*[L]e témoignage (vgayoutioun) est destiné à devenir une preuve (pasd)*'. In parallel, on the use of photographs of the genocide immediately after the 1918 armistice, see Kévonian (2005: 129).

⁴⁴ Nichanian talks of the 'absolutely catastrophic effects' (*'effets proprement catastrophiques'*) of this transformation, effects which are discussed and analysed in the pages he devotes to Zabel

Essayan, who in February 1917 published the first eye-witness account of the Armenian genocide. (Nichanian, 2006: 215-274).

⁴⁵ ‘[D]epuis 90 ans, en prouvant, en faisant fonctionner le témoignage comme preuve, je réponds à l’injonction du bourreau. Il me tient’.

⁴⁶ ‘[P]reuve vivante de sa propre mort’; ‘le témoignage, c’est la honte’. See the wonderful article by Nichanian (2003: 103-122).

⁴⁷ On the shift from cultural value to exhibition value, see Benjamin (1973/1939: 219). Moreover, let us recall that the immediate media coverage of the Armenian genocide has been, in general, a paradigmatic example of the public use of history (Guerzoni, 2013).

⁴⁸ ‘The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. [...] Since the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception.’ (Benjamin, 1973/1939: 228-229).

⁴⁹ ‘A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we perceive a chain of events*, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress’. (Benjamin, 1973/1940: 249)

⁵⁰ Benjamin’s grave is inscribed with the following epitaph, taken from ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1973/1940: 248): ‘There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’.