

FILM REVIEW

Intent to Destroy, directed and produced by Joe Berlinger. 2017, 114 minutes. English. Contact: Cailin McFadden, Cargo Releasing (New York), cailin.cargoreleasing@gmail.com. Webpage: <https://www.asnconvention.com/intent-to-destroy>. Shown at the ASN 2018 World Convention.

Watching *Intent to Destroy* was for me not simply an evening at the movies. The film by the prolific documentary filmmaker Joe Berlinger seeks to understand the elusive and contested history of the Armenian Genocide and the efforts by the Turkish government and pseudo-scholars to deny the reality of the catastrophic events of 1915–1916. Not only does it provide a succinct and persuasive account of the mass deportations and massacres of Ottoman Armenians a century ago, in which some 800,000 to more than a million people died, but it also addresses the fraught issues of what we can learn about a traumatic past and how we can combat those who propose “alternative facts.” For a historian of the Genocide like myself, passive reception of the film is impossible. Instead, an active engagement with the talking heads (most of whom I know personally) and the archival footage (with which I was largely familiar) both riveted my attention and raised questions about the problems of representing the unthinkable. Berlinger’s ingenious device was to make his film about the making of another film, the rather melodramatic *The Promise* (2016) directed by Terry George, already famous for the Academy Award winning *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). Most reviewers panned *The Promise*, which lost most of its \$90 million investment by the late Armenian billionaire Kirk Kerkorian, and conceded that *Intent to Destroy* was superior to its fictional predecessor.

Filmmaking, like the writing of history, is a process of re-creation based on selectively assembling a montage of source materials. It is subjective rather than objective, though in both cinematography and historical writing the conventions of the craft must be followed. For historians, the narrative and analysis must be based on verifiable evidence, reasonable inferences, plausible narration, attention to anomalies and contradictions that might confront one’s initial hypotheses, and as much objectivity and neutrality as is possible.

We all are aware, to paraphrase Karl Marx, that someone has to educate the educator. For filmmakers, objectivity is also tenuous. At every level—available shots, selection of images and words, the agony of editing—subjective judgments must be made. Berlinger acknowledges that he sees film as an “incredible medium for social change” and hopes that the viewer will experience “profound moments of reflection.” He says that he looks not for a capital T in truth, but rather “an emotional truthfulness” (*Film Courage*, published on November 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zilr9xNR2kI>).

Thanks to the powerful images and the testimony of witnesses and scholars like Taner Akcam, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Vicken Cheterian, *Intent to Destroy* delivers on that emotional truthfulness. A few insignificant factual errors by some of the commentators do not mar the overall portrayal of the fate of Ottoman Armenians. Although most viewers would be convinced that the facts of those distant events are incontestable, the film gives voice to Turkish state officials and others who claim that the killings were the result of a civil war, mutual extermination between Turks and Armenians. Everyone accepts that Armenians suffered, but the deniers emphasize that Muslims were also killed and their losses should be taken into account. The deniers insist on a dubious moral equivalence between victims and perpetrators. They miss an important distinction. The Ottomans were at war with the Entente and died at nine different fronts, as well as from

disease and the incompetent management of the war by officials and officers. Armenians were killed by their own government and its agents, who had convinced themselves that Armenians would aid the Russians in their war against the Ottomans. The Young Turks who led the government came to believe, or at least proclaim, that the entire Armenian nation was an existential threat to the empire.

Present-day Turkey holds that what happened in 1915 does not fit the conventional definition of genocide as intentional state-initiated “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (as defined in Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.html>). In the film, Akcam makes the powerful point that Turkish denial is based on an inability to admit that the Genocide undermines the Turkish national myth of how the Republic was founded. Instead of a war of self-defense and liberation against treacherous enemies, the Ottoman war was directed against one of its own constituent peoples in order to re-engineer the demographic makeup of Anatolia, now conceived as the “Turkish homeland.”

Intent to Destroy is extremely effective in demonstrating that during World War I the Ottomans initiated and carried out a genocide, the predecessor to the Judeocide of World War II. In addition, it also relates how a consistent campaign has been waged to distort or eliminate knowledge of these events. When early in the 1930s MGM set out to make a film of Franz Werfel’s novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which detailed the struggle of the Armenians against national annihilation, the Kemalist government of the Republic of Turkey threatened that if the film was made, American films would be banned in Turkey. Ankara pressured the Department of State to prevail upon Hollywood to give up its plans to make the film, and the project was abrogated in pre-production. Until *The Promise* no big budget depiction of the Genocide has ever been filmed in the United States. However, the Canadian-Armenian director Adam Egoyan made *Ararat* (2002), also a film about a film about the Genocide, and several films made in Europe—most notably, *The Lark Farm* (2007) by the Taviani brothers and *The Cut* (2014) by the Turkish German director Akin Gazi—attempted to visualize the mass killings at the end of the empire.

That a genocide occurred is the ground on which both *The Promise* and *Intent to Destroy* stand, and both Terry George and Joe Berlinger worked to find ways to establish narratives about a tragedy that has largely been obscured. Unfortunately, George chose to tell the story through a soapy love triangle that diminishes the centrality of the Genocide. His team deliberately minimized the gore that comes with mass murder in order to make a more palatable film. Those choices were fatal to the movie. On the other hand, by juxtaposing two films—one fictional, the other documentary—Berlinger reveals that a contested past is recoverable, even though it may never be accepted unquestionably by all. Berlinger selects from *The Promise* precisely those scenes that show the horrors of 1915. He lingers on the preparations for a scene in which the Armenian hero of the film finds the murdered inhabitants of his native village. The carrying of dummies to be thrown in the river, the careful arrangement of the extras who will play dead, the selection of a young extra to play a murdered child (and how he is instructed in Spanish to relax all his muscles and lie limp)—all these efforts to find ways of showing the devastation of a people and a culture are rendered in the image of people lying in the woods, near the stream, almost as if asleep, but unmoving, some with eyes open. Watching the crew paint the extras with simulated blood and the reaction of the lead actors to the scene (some of whom break down and sob) is oddly more evocative of the terrors of that time than that same scene as depicted in *The Promise*.

Fiction, a novel, or even a work of history struggles to encompass a monstrous collective crime like genocide. Film is probably the only medium powerful enough to embrace the pain, despair, and loss of such experiences. Its conventions hesitate less than those of history to move beyond cognition to the world of affect. Historians are humbled by the potent immediacy of film, but then they can take comfort that their professional reconstructions are indispensable to what

we can know and what can be shown. Particularly effective in *Intent to Destroy* is the documentary's multiple lenses, verbal and visual: the voices of witnesses and commentators, archival photographs clandestinely taken by German officers at the time of the massacres, as well as reenactments of lost moments by actors. What on the printed page can possibly match the panoramic view, shot from above by a camera mounted on a drone, of a column of desperate, bereft Armenians marching to their death?

Ronald Grigor Suny
The University of Michigan
rgsuny@umich.edu