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# Serge Avedikian's "Barking Island"

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I think by now we can forget about the slogan "never again". The real question is: "how long to the next genocide?" Will, in this time of capitalist crisis and growing political disaffection, generalized war provide opportunities to whip up some crusade aiming to ostracize and even physically annihilate some victims on a mass scale, preferably those who profess belief in a different deity and, collaterally, those politically troublesome people who deny deities altogether?

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L340xH205/F12113-32d98.jpg>

Serge Avedikian doesn't explicitly ask these questions in his new film "Barking Island" (Chienne d'histoire in French). In fact no one says a word about anything. It is an animated film about dogs. But it is not one of those Disney type productions where the dogs (or other animals) speak Modern Languages and express ideas and emotions so convincingly that their nudity is subliminally disturbing. No. In this film the dogs live in an environment ruled by human beings, but there is no talking to disturb our perception of the social relations existing between the canines and the homo sapiens.

[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH247/Chienne\\_d\\_histoire\\_1-6ba11.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH247/Chienne_d_histoire_1-6ba11.jpg)

The remarkable thing about this film is the contrast between its esthetic beauty and the horror it recounts. The animated images are paintings rendered by a young artist, Thomas Azuélós. The luminous depth of the colors, the invocations of oriental Constantinople and the ferocity of the figures are sublimely, compellingly cruel. This is great art, and it is not surprising that Avedikian was given the Palme d'or at Cannes for this 15-minute film.

The story depicted is known to most who have read about the history of genocide. To kill upwards of one and a half Armenians between 1915 and 1918 involved some careful planning and rational experimentation. And this is where the dogs came in. Cleansing Constantinople of the thousands of dogs roaming free there provided the best opportunity to test methods used later on the Armenians.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH261/chapitre1022-813a2.jpg>

In 1910, the government of the Young Turks enlisted the best European scientists in their effort to find a solution. For example, the Pasteur Institute in Paris provided a study explaining the scientific possibilities, several of which were attempted. The use of toxic gases in specially constructed vehicles was proposed, as was the subsequent rendering of the corpses into hides and meat. Incineration in specially designed ovens was another solution envisioned.

All of this is of course familiar to us. The problem for the Turkish authorities was financial. In practice, cost-benefit analysis made modern methods unacceptable. The potential expenditures for developing the needed technology overrode available resources. So it was back to the drawing board.

At some point it was suggested that the animals be simply rounded up and transported to a desert island in the Bosphorus. It would be an open-air dog pound where, eventually, about 30,000 offending pooches were concentrated. The fact that no vegetation or other edible substance existed on the island ensured a definitive resolution to the nuisance they represented. The island was too far from land to allow the creatures to swim back, although many tried. The only disagreeable aspect of the plan, once put into operation, were winds that conveyed the sounds of screams and howls to Constantinople. But this annoyance ceased after a few weeks.

The massacre of the Armenians followed much the same pattern. Although gassing, burning, drowning, the injection of typhus bacilli in children, and other imaginable methods were employed, in the end most of the victims were forcibly displaced and died from exhaustion and starvation.

Well, this is a story well known to aficionados of mass extermination,

Adolf Hitler first of all. On at least two occasions Hitler reassured his henchmen that the destruction of the Jews was entirely feasible.

"Who remembers the Armenians?" he said clinching the argument.

[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH243/Chienne\\_d\\_histoire\\_2-7e88a.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH243/Chienne_d_histoire_2-7e88a.jpg)

To go to the gist of it, real understanding of the murder of one and a half million Armenians beginning in April of 1915 must include knowledge about the preparations for that national effort to cleanse a modernizing Turkey of people considered to be outside the pale of "Turkish identity".

The Armenian Christian population of Turkey had long served as scapegoats in times of stress due to the declining fortunes of the Ottoman Empire. The attacks against them increased in intensity throughout the nineteenth century. Between 1894 and 1896, around 300,000 were killed in various urban centers. Around 30,000 were dispatched in and around the southern city of Adana in 1909. But these were only the most dramatically massive misfortunes befalling the Armenians over a long period.

The dis-ease giving rise to nationalism pervaded everywhere. Increasing numbers of Armenians saw in "autonomy" and "independence" their salvation, as did Jews attracted to a messianic "Zionism" at the same time. The logic inherent in the process is a striking perversity: the realization of the national aspirations of one group means the physical elimination of others, either by removing them from one place to another or using the radical and, it is thought, definitive (or "final") means of group murder.

[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH193/Chienne\\_d\\_histoire\\_3-6e2b6.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH193/Chienne_d_histoire_3-6e2b6.jpg)

Thusly opened the "short twentieth century", with the application of scientific rationalism in the service of the religion of nationalism against those who are "out of place" in the nationalistic scheme of things. The tragedy of the process is that the most prominent victims themselves turned to nationalist solutions in order to protect themselves, and they had been doing so for decades. It was an understandable reaction, one that confirmed the idea that Armenians could not be assimilated into the Turkish "nation".

The "Young (which is say "modern" and "progressive") Turks" had, they thought, to clear the field for the building of a new state. In their turn, the Nazis propagated the idea that Germany had to be purified of its "blood" enemies in its social and cultural reconstruction. In both cases, and others, the new "religion of nationalism" (as Carl Jung called it) was a motivating force.

[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L312xH377/Serge\\_Avedikian\\_2010\\_6626-2-87963.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L312xH377/Serge_Avedikian_2010_6626-2-87963.jpg)

For Serge Avedikian, here is real problem: the nationalist mindset. This is the meaning of the dog massacre. He explained this during an interview at the Mediterranean Film Festival (Montpellier, France 22-30 October 2010).

"I chose this story," he said, "because I think there has been no greater misfortunate than the invention of the nation state. I am absolutely opposed to the very notion of nationality as an official type of identity.

An identity cannot be 'national' because identities are necessarily multiple, plural, conjugated. Defining anyone is such a standard way is unacceptable." For him, the acceleration of communications of all kinds has paradoxically made people more and more nomadic, like the dogs.

**How does Avedikian see himself?** "I was born in Erevan, Armenia, but I live in France and have French 'nationality', and I also have a memory. My grandfather lived in Constantinople in 1910, it was the moment when empires were breaking up and when nationalism was being imposed on everyone.

The eradication of the dogs is evocative of what this government—that of the Young Turks—fascinated by Europe as they were, wished to accomplish. The major players were European dandies.

They were educated in Paris for the most part, and many of them were Freemasons. They were secular positivists fascinated by science and anxious to change the world. When they returned to Turkey it was with the idea of transforming it according to a European model. For them, the groups of errant dogs were emblematic of an intolerable disorder typical of a backward society and culture.”

[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH232/Chienne\\_d\\_h-68f00.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH232/Chienne_d_h-68f00.jpg)

**Why is the story important?** “It is an atrocious story. And the implications are clear. I am convinced that if there had been a Nuremberg-style trial of those who carried out the genocide of the Armenians, it is very possible that the Nazis would not have been able to pursue their own genocidal project. It is the belief in impunity that allows little and big dictators to act. All this is undoubtedly complex, but I think crimes are repeated when their authors are not held accountable.”

**What does all this portend?** “The condition of dogs in Muslim countries is very particular. On the one hand dogs are not generally allowed inside human dwellings. They are considered to be impure. But on the other hand they are recognized as having a social function and have the right to live. In fact, dogs are accepted and protected in these countries as nowhere else. There is a tolerance of them and a respect for them that are generally lacking elsewhere. In 1910 there were many examples of people interfering with the collection and deportation of the dogs. But the film is really concerned more than with the events of 1910. Let me put it this way: modernization, especially urbanization, and now “globalization”, means the death of the free dogs. The dogs were scapegoats then, and now there is no room for free agents anywhere. Whoever is on the margins, who is non conventional, who refuses being controlled and forced into the national-state mold will be an object of such repression. How many errant dogs or errant people will be allowed to exist? That is the question.”

[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH245/Chienne\\_d\\_histoire-d8ebe.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH245/Chienne_d_histoire-d8ebe.jpg)

*Post-scriptum :*

*Serge Avedikian is now preparing a documentary called “The Dogs of Istanbul”. For information contact: ron at sacrebleuprod.com*

*Larry Portis’ book Qu’est-ce que le fascisme ? Un phénomène social d’hier et d’aujourd’hui (What is Fascism? A Social Phenomenon Yesterday and Today) was published in December 2010. He can be reached at larry.portis at orange.fr*

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