

There's No Such Thing as Bad Publicity

Using Stunts to Sell a Genocide Film

Kristi Kouchakji

Introduction

Ravished Armenia or *Auction of Souls* (1919, Oscar Apfel, USA) was made with the intention of creating widespread awareness of the genocide and raising funds for Near East Relief (currently operating as the Near East Foundation). The film is based on the memoirs of Aurora Mardiganian, a survivor of the Armenian genocide, which were originally serialized in major American newspapers before being released in book form, and then adapted to the screen. Shot on location on a Santa Monica beach (Slide 2014, 15), featuring Mardiganian herself and using Armenian refugees as extras in re-creating the events recounted in the book (“8,000 Armenians” 1919), the film features a main storyline about a white American teacher who is chased into the desert alongside her Armenian charges, witness to torture, murder, and general brutality along the way, with a heavy emphasis on sexual violence and human trafficking. The film was also released under the title *Auction of Souls*, ostensibly to avoid confusion with the book while also appealing to Christian righteousness and, at the same time, playing on Orientalist fantasies of slave markets and harems (Torchin 2015, 50). The marketing for the film went to great lengths to emphasize its basis in historical truth as well as its approval by political and military leaders, clergy, and others held up as arbiters of truth and good taste (“Little Theatres” 1919). At the same time, however, publicity materials also played up the rape and torture of Armenian women as well as Mardiganian’s involvement in the filmmaking and exhibition processes. While in release, local exhibitors’ publicity ploys became increasingly outlandish, relying on a combination of Orientalism, voyeurism, and moral righteousness to increase ticket sales. Furthermore, the film itself, according to both the film’s reviews and the script reprinted in Anthony Slide’s study of the film, positioned an American woman as the main character in a fictional narrative interwoven with Mardiganian’s memoirs, in an attempt to increase American audience identification with victims of Turkish aggression.

It should be noted that the film itself will not be analyzed in a close reading here, given that it was initially printed on nitrate stock and only a few fragments of the original remain. According to Slide, the film presently circulating online under the title *Ravished Armenia* consists of only those few fragments cut together with stock footage, newsreel footage, and other cinematic odds and ends to make a documentary of a genocide otherwise undocumented in moving images, and labeled as *Ravished Armenia* (Slide 2014, 29), despite the vast difference between this and the original film. Slide’s book by the same name includes a copy of the original film’s shooting script with the rescued and recycled scenes in bold for reader/viewer comparison. Leshu Torchin’s work on the film, however, refers to specific reel numbers, indicating either that a

complete copy may be in existence, or that her analysis is based on what Slide speculates is an assemblage of sorts. An analytical comparison of both works, while a fascinating research project, is beyond the scope of this project. As such, this article focuses primarily on what paratextual elements are readily available for empirical review.

Torchin has extensively reviewed how witnessing and testimony function as a call to action in relation to *Ravished Armenia*, drawing on the film's publicity material and live prologue in so doing (Torchin 2012, 21, 60). Here, I aim to delve further into the ways in which these materials extended *Ravished Armenia*'s storyworld to generate and leverage audience affect, and how this informs the Near East Foundation's current media practices. By taking as a case study a specific film from an era not normally associated with current understandings of transmedia storytelling, this article hopes to illuminate the ways in which connectivity and capital (social, cultural, and economic) operate within transmedia activism, while expanding our understanding of "transmedia" to include analog, and even silent-era, media, and opening up questions about how impact (and its measurement) inform the execution of such projects.

Ravished Armenia: The book, the film, the sideshow

The Film

Despite its release several years before the conceptualisation of documentary as a film genre, with no observational or actuality footage to be recycled into the telling of Mardiganian's story, and replete with fictionalized elements, the film was nonetheless billed as an "authenticated photographic record of historical fact" by *The Washington Post* ("Plays" 1919, L4). It is worth noting here that while *Variety* did review *Ravished Armenia* as a film, grappling with the film's hybridity and calling its usefulness as activism into question (Sime 19, 59), major mainstream media publications took a different tack in their coverage of the film. *The New York Times* in particular treated early screenings of *Ravished Armenia* as social events ("Ravished" 1919, 4), including a list of society figures—former US President Taft among them—in attendance ("Written" 1919, 44), even when such items were included in the paper's entertainment section or at the end of film industry gossip columns. In the lead-up to the film's public release, *The Washington Post* published a major feature article on the genocide and Near East Relief's work (Owen 1919, SM2). This article positioned Near East Relief as the film's producer and creative force; Mrs. Harriman (chair of Near East Relief's National Motion Picture Committee), as its spokesperson and Aurora's saviour; and the Turks, Islam in general, and the Sheikh ul-Islam in particular as forces of evil to be countered by such acts of moral righteousness such as attending showings of *Ravished Armenia* and, in the process, making donations to Near East Relief. *The New York Times* followed this coverage with write-ups and smaller articles emphasizing the film's endorsement by Christian clergy and society figures alike ("Appeals" 1919, 24), thereby underscoring the moral imperative laid out in the earlier *Washington Post* article. *The Washington Post's* subsequent (and more limited) coverage took a similar turn, primarily emphasizing the humanitarian intentions behind the film's production, in one small write-up calling on viewers to identify directly with the Armenians portrayed on-screen ("At the Local" 1919, 5), and in another, focusing mainly on Mardiganian's presence at a screening as well as the gendered aspects of the torture presented in the film ("John Peter Toohey" 1919, A3).

This type of coverage served to create a framework in which the intervention of white, Christian Americans was positioned as a moral imperative for a white, Christian American audience. The film's portrayal of individual white, Christian Americans as saviours can thus be understood on one level as an appeal to the same audience through mimesis and identification. As Jane Gaines argues, films that move audiences to want to take action do so by making a connection between viewers and conditions they understand as being part of their world (Gaines 1999, 91), and that filmmakers "use images of bodies in struggle *because they want audiences to carry on that same struggle* (...). The whole rationale behind documenting political battles on film, as opposed to producing written records, is to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling" (emphasis hers) (91). Moreover, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write, the insertion of a Western character in narratives set in foreign lands serves to ensure identification with that character by Western viewers, replicating and reifying "the colonialist mechanism by which the orient,

rendered as devoid of any active historical or narrative role, becomes, as Edward Said suggests, the object of study and spectacle” (Shohat and Stam 2014, 148). Thus, by drawing on print media coverage—“the abstractly intellectual,” however sensationalised it may have been—that portrayed the Turks and Muslim people as specific enemies to what is considered right and good by a white, Christian American audience, and then, in adapting a written memoir—again, “the abstractly intellectual”—and in the process inserting white, Christian American characters (and particularly a woman in a helping profession) as the film’s heroes, the makers of *Ravished Armenia* leveraged this media coverage to presumably produce a mimetic reaction in which American viewers would be moved to support Near East Relief’s work.

While the overall lack of critical discussion about *Ravished Armenia* in mainstream publications is due in large part to reviewers preferring not to detract from the social good it was intended to produce (Slide 2014, 21), the coverage the film was given points to the spectacle created around the film being seen as more worthy of coverage as philanthropic social events than the actual film, particularly at screenings and events where Mardiganian herself was said to be present. Moreover, despite the lack of widespread critical engagement with the film itself, an advertisement produced by Near East Relief claims that “many noted experts in the production of the most spectacular and absorbing motion pictures” have said of *Ravished Armenia* that it “is the greatest motion picture achievement in theme, human interest, seriousness of purpose and thrilling development of dramatic conception ever attempted,” before concluding in large block letters that “Those who are privileged to see it will also help SAVE A LIFE” (Near East Foundation Archive n.d.) While this is not unusual for Near East Relief’s visual media of the era—among other examples, a poster from 1918 depicts a huddled child swathed in darkness, and boldly proclaims “GIVE OR WE PERISH” (n.d.)—the effect of this ad is to frame seeing the film as a direct act of solidarity with immediate impact, appealing to viewers’ sense of moral righteousness in order to generate donations (as well as box office receipts), while simultaneously tying the film and its advertisements back into Near East Relief’s visual media ecology.



Fig. 1. “Save a Life” ad, image via Near East Foundation Digital Archive

Fig. 2. “Aurora Mardiganian, sole survivor of half a million Armenian girls,” Image via *Exhibitors Herald and Motography*, July 12, 1919: 8.

The reliance on moral imperative in the film's marketing, as well as the creation of spectacle around the film as a secondary marketing strategy, bears further examination in this context. While commercial print ads for the film claim that, despite the fictionalized aspects, this is Mardiganian's own history being portrayed, the ads also make much of the fact that the film's New York premiere was a private screening held at the Plaza with admission set at \$10 per head (roughly \$143 in 2018) (US Inflation Calculator 2018) as a fundraiser for Near East Relief, often referring to it with variations on "The picture originally shown at \$10 a seat" ("The Greatest Picture" 1919, 3548). This draws on mainstream media coverage of the film as a social event by using price as an indication of exclusivity and intrinsic value, making attendance at future screenings—regardless of ticket price—an aspirational act contributing to the development of social or cultural capital. Furthermore, by recalling earlier coverage of the film by using the reference to the Plaza fundraiser, this oft-repeated tagline also appealed to potential spectators' social consciences and sense of moral righteousness.

Print ads for *Ravished Armenia* alternate between two modes of address, clearly destined for two distinct audiences. The first positions Mardiganian as the only Christian woman to have survived the atrocities, and generally features longer blocks of text citing clergy, judges, and other moral authorities (i.e., white Christian male colonial authority figures) as having deemed the film to be morally worthy despite the outrages depicted ("Never a Film" 1919, 8). While larger, and therefore pricier, versions of these ads appear in trade publications, smaller versions of them with more concise texts appear in mainstream publications like the *Times* and the *Post*, usually a day or two after the film's being mentioned in entertainment listings or towards the end of the film's run at a given theatre. According to Torchin, these types of ads drew on a more general context of media portrayals of Armenian persecution being framed specifically as Christian persecution, thus leveraging religious affinity to draw audiences to screenings, while turning such news coverage into part of Near East Relief's media ecology over and above coverage focused on the film and its production or gala screenings (Torchin 2012, 44-52). The second type of advertisement, seen more often in trade publications, plays heavily on the more outrageous aspects of the atrocities depicted in the film, refers to the film as spectacular, and sometimes features line art of a nearly-nude woman in bondage ("The Greatest Picture" 1919, 3548). In Minneapolis, the latter was alleged to be too much for a local women's group, who protested the film being shown at all. Naturally, the press coverage of this protest drew even more attention to the film than print advertising would have done alone, and the local exhibitor was credited with having staged it as "one of the most successful works of exhibitor showmanship" ever seen in Minneapolis ("Protest Only" 1919, 318).

The Sideshow

Creating social controversy over the film or positioning its viewing as essential to building or maintaining one's social capital were not the only tactics used to garner media attention, increase attendance at screenings of *Ravished Armenia*, and, by extension, increase donations to Near East Relief. The film's initial screening in New York was an invitation-only fundraiser, thereby setting the preconditions for these two strategies. The film was then put into general release and interested theatre owners were advised by every industry publication to engage in publicity stunts of all kinds to increase attendance, in addition to partnerships with local Near East Relief chapters, who in turn undertook publicity work through philanthropic outreach campaigns (Torchin 2012, 56). Exhibitors' tactics went far beyond staging protests outside their theatres, with media coverage describing a live prelude featuring elaborate stage sets, live camels, Mardiganian herself ("Film Star" 1921, 82), and, in a case of extreme Orientalism, belly dancers ("Sets Pace" 1920, 603).

Furthermore, every screening of the film, regardless of other publicity stunts, included a scripted, live prologue performed by local actors between the film's opening titles and the first scene of the film itself. The script for the prologue, also reprinted in Slide's work, includes costume and lighting notes as well as stage directions, ensuring consistent reproduction at every performance and in every venue, in an attempt to ensure a consistent reading of the film by every audience, and a consistent affective—and financially lucrative—response. This prologue, which called directly on audience members to donate to Near

East Relief, features an embodied, implicitly masculine America as the Christian saviour of an embodied, explicitly feminine, literally ravished Armenia, along with a hefty dose of Islamophobia (Slide 2014, 273). As Benedetta Guerzoni points out in her study of the film, such gendered imagery in both the prologue and print advertising for the film draws on a longer tradition of representations of Armenia embodied in devout Christian women, and further to that, of Armenian women as victims, and particularly victims of sexual violence (Guerzoni 2016, 55). Guerzoni also points out that to US audiences in particular, “representation(s) of violence against women (were) often a manifestation of the fears of white society” (52). Shohat and Stam address this kind of colonial rescue fantasy in their writings as well, stating that metaphorical fantasies of colonial rescue of feminized territories “[give] prominence to more literal narratives of rescue, specifically of Western and non-Western women—from polygamous Arabs, libidinous Blacks, and macho Latinos” (Shohat and Stam 2014, 156). As such, the gendered aspects of the spectacle and visual material surrounding the film, in conjunction with the insertion of a white woman into the film’s narrative, can be said to call upon two different audiences, with the same end result (donations to Near East Relief via box office receipts): The first, those whose moral or religious outrage (or racial fears) are provoked by such imagery, epitomized by clerical endorsements and screenings reserved for women only; and the second, those who find such imagery titillating, in an extreme example of what Torchin might call “inappropriate affect,” (Torchin 2012, 11) epitomized by the use of live belly dancers as pre-show entertainment (or alternatively, those who respond strongly to what Shohat and Stam call “the rape and rescue trope, by which virginal White women, and at times dark women, are rescued from dark men”) (156).

These audiences are both also called on via allusions to white slavery present in the film’s ads, in the title *Auction of Souls*, and, ultimately, in the film’s scenario. This draws on a history of white slavery films released in the years immediately preceding *Ravished Armenia*, which, according to Shelley Stamp, were a contested site of female spectatorship and desire. The film’s marketing towards women, and especially the inclusion of women-only screenings hosted by Mardiganian or a stand-in, represent an attempt to make the film, despite the sexualized and gendered violence it portrays and its inclusion of a slave market scene, morally “safe” for women to view and openly discuss under the guise of education. In that sense, there is also the possibility that the film and its exhibitionary context functioned as a smokescreen for colonial/Orientalist female desire; although, recalling Guerzoni’s words about representations of violence against women being a manifestation of white anxieties (Guerzoni 2016, 52), there is also an argument to be made that the film simultaneously functioned as a warning against exploring that desire beyond the cinema. Moreover, the presence of women and the film’s popularity among women may have also served as moral camouflage for the film—as Stamp writes:

Some commentators, mostly those promoting white slave pictures, actually welcomed women in the audience at screenings. They hoped that the appearance of female patrons might lessen the taint of tawdriness that adhered to the material; that women might lend the films an air of credibility, reframing their salacious narratives as ‘educational’ vehicles; and that the female gaze might bestow upon the films an instructional purpose and merit (Stamp 1996, 9).

In that sense, the presence of Mardiganian (or a stand-in) as well as any discussion sessions that followed screenings become all the more important in thinking of how the film simultaneously caters to a colonial, Orientalist gaze and warns women against exploring desire, all while dispelling, or at least temporarily alleviating, perceptions of movie theatres as themselves morally questionable places for women. This tension is also arguably reflected in the dual titles for the film, with one—*Ravished Armenia*—pointing more explicitly to sexual desire, and the other—*Auction of Souls*—pointing to the threat of a white slave market.

The recurrent themes and multiple uses of the same imagery within the ensemble of tactics to attract audiences and mobilize them to specific actions calls to mind Torchin’s argument that transmedia activism is based on multiplicity and reproducibility, as well as her argument that successful transmedia activism takes into account exhibition context and mobilizes audience affect in the moment (Torchin 2012, 17). By drawing on news coverage of the atrocities to advertise the film, inserting a white, American, Christian woman into the scenario as a main character and point of identification for an American viewer, and

by literally presenting those same viewers with both a woman embodying Armenia in the live prologue as well as, in major cities, Mardiganian herself (or a convincing look-alike), while hewing to a predetermined script about America's role as Christian saviour of souls while simultaneously drawing on the popularity of white slave films, the film's producers created an extended (if Orientalized) storyworld in which viewers who were so inclined could play out their fantasies of white saviourism via rape and rescue fantasies.



Dancer who appeared in costume shown during the engagement of "Auction of Souls" at the Tivoli theatre, San Francisco



Flashlight photo of crowds attending the Columbia Theatre, Dayton, Ohio, where the First National picture, "Auction of Souls," was playing.

Fig. 3. Preshow belly dancer, image via *Motion Picture News*, January 10, 1920: 603

Fig. 4. A crowd in Dayton, image via *Exhibitors Herald*, January 31, 1920: 90

The role Mardiganian was asked to play in this bears further examination in its own right. While she was said to be present at many screenings, leading discussions about sexual violence at women-only sessions, court records would reveal that, in fact, there were seven different women posing as Mardiganian to fulfill contracts with exhibitors (and later research would reveal that this was also due partly to Mardiganian's exhaustion) (Slide 2014, 25). She was also heavily featured in the film's promotional and publicity materials. Along with the earlier serialization of her memoir, this brings to mind Marc Steinberg's discussion of the role of a character in transmedia storytelling. Steinberg writes that transmedia storytelling, by being fragmented across several platforms, "quite naturally [prompts] a divergence of narrative worlds" (Steinberg 2012, 188). Steinberg goes on to argue that these divergent worlds can be regulated by a character, which exists as "an entity that both permits a series to diverge (allowing transmedia development) and holds things together (allowing these divergent series to be read, despite their incongruities, as existing within a larger, yet unitary world)" (190). Steinberg further defines the role of character in this operation as:

a concrete thing and an abstract something that travels between things, holding converging and diverging series together. The character cannot be reduced to any one of its incarnations but must be defined both by its material incarnations and by the ways that it exceeds them (...) the character allows for the communication of media, object, and consumer series. It is an abstract technology of relation, a connector that is both actual or embodied and virtual or abstract (194).

In other words, Steinberg argues that character can be the common point of entry to a larger narrative from any one of a number of cultural fragments in circulation. I argue that this idea can be mapped onto *Ravished Armenia* by thinking of the two strands of advertising for the film (one more conservative, and the other which appeals more directly to the prurient), as well as Near East Relief's own public relations work, Mardiganian's in-person appearances and her serialized memoirs, and the live prologue as divergent narratives which all hinge around the idea of Aurora Mardiganian as *the* Armenian woman to be saved (or ravished, as the case may be) by white, Christian Americans. Moreover, that stand-ins for Mardiganian were eventually hired to ensure a more easily reproduced audience experience in multiple locations, sometimes simultaneously, point to the film's promoters thinking of Mardiganian more as the fictionalized version of herself she was asked to portray in the film, and that the figure of Armenia in the prologue arguably represents, than as the real, live, genocide survivor and refugee that she was.

Thus, the film's producers—including Near East Relief—engaged in a form of transmedia spectacle-making centered on Mardiganian as character, designed to generate and leverage audience affect from a variety of perspectives for both additional donations to Near East Relief and word-of-mouth publicity for future screenings and fundraising activities. Furthermore, exhibitors' additional spectacles accompanying screenings of the film heightened the emotional stakes by playing up more exotic perceptions of Turkey and Armenia, thereby underscoring the sense of peril at the hands of the foreign, racialized, and sexualized Other inherent in both the prologue and the film itself (as well as in the film's advertising campaign and the contemporaneous media coverage of both the film and the atrocities as a general news item, as previously discussed), presumably in an attempt to further predispose audiences to contribute to fundraising efforts.

A lack of firm box office numbers reported in trade publications at the time raises the question of whether exhibitors' claims of large attendance figures are themselves part of the media ecology around *Ravished Armenia*. While some exhibitors submitted photographs of crowds clamouring to be admitted to screenings ("Dayton Liked" 1920, 90), these are only representative of a large crowd outside a theatre, not of any actual admission figures, foreshadowing today's problem of relying on metrics as an indication of impact. Furthermore, many exhibitors' claims to have broken their own attendance records were printed in articles lauding the publicity stunts mounted around the film. Where the truth value of these statements and photos is strengthened is, instead, in very short exhibitor-submitted reports from small towns, printed under headings like "What the Picture Did For Me." While a few of these report solid box office business, usually as a result of a promotional or publicity campaign of some kind, others report slower sales and an unpopular reception, with comments such as "Picture excellent, but leaves too terrible an impression. Not a picture for children," (79) and "Drew a big house, but very few liked it" (75) The latter reports were mainly from exhibitors in smaller towns, likely with smaller budgets for generating their own publicity through costly sideshows, staged protests, and so on. That many of these also cite the film's dark nature as the reason for its unpopularity serves to reaffirm others' decisions to exploit the more prurient aspects of the film and create a spectacle around it, despite its sombre subject matter. One exhibitor went so far as to write in to a trade publication to advise other small exhibitors to advertise higher ticket prices for the film, as a way of evoking the prestige around the film's gala premiere in order to generate excitement and thus larger audiences without needing to engage in any further spectacle-making (69). Ultimately, in the absence of any clear box office figures, and in the absence of any serious criticism or mainstream press coverage of audience response to the film rather than publicity around it, available evidence suggests only that the public responded to the construction of a narrative world centered on the fictionalized version of Mardiganian as well as exploitative stunts designed to bring them into the theatre, and that word-of-mouth about the film in the absence of these stunts was likely to have been less than positive.

Despite this, however, Slide states that the film raised \$117 million (roughly \$1.7 billion in 2018) for Near East Relief (Slide 2014, 28), far more than the \$30 million goal indicated in the film's humanitarian-oriented advertising.¹ Further, Torchin writes that Near East Relief, inspired by *Ravished Armenia*'s success, continued to produce shorter films in collaboration with media outlets wanting access to field sites where the organization performed its relief work (Torchin 2012, 57). Now known as the Near East Foundation, the organization's outreach efforts are largely centered around online platforms, and include short, high-quality videos of individuals benefitting from the Foundation's economic development-based

programs, as well as bits of quantified data identified on their website as “Our Impact” (Near East Foundation 2016).² The case studies featured on the organizations’ website and other channels are all situated in locations that have been the object of news coverage in recent years, and all focus on issues that have also received a great deal of media attention: Israeli-Palestinian co-operation, climate change, women’s economic enfranchisement, etc.

Ravished Armenia: 2nd ed., revised and updated for the web

Based on this, it would seem that the Foundation’s approach to visual media has simply evolved from their post-*Ravished Armenia* activity, embracing the current trend favouring data visualization in the process. However, the final paragraph of Slide’s acknowledgements includes an exhortation to the reader to donate to the Foundation, complete with donation information and the Foundation’s mailing address (Slide 2014, ix-x). In addition, the book includes a full reprint of both the original, serialized print version of *Ravished Armenia*, as well as the screenplay and the full text of Near East Relief’s Prologue, along with many production stills, advertisements, and related fundraising materials; the Foreword was written by prominent Armenian-Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan,³ echoing Near East Relief’s use of celebrity endorsement through a series of short films featuring Jackie Coogan engaging in relief work on their behalf (Torchin 2012, 58); and the publication date of the second edition of Slide’s work coincides with a time when news coverage of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide was beginning to ramp up. Taken together, this all supports an argument that Slide’s work is itself part of the Near East Foundation’s current media ecology around *Ravished Armenia*, adding the same kind of moral (and in this case academic) authority to the work as earlier endorsements from clergy, military leaders, ambassadors, and so on.⁴ Moreover, tracing this history of Near East Relief’s media output shows that they have always operated, and continue to operate, in a neoliberal framework which capitalizes on connections to those in social and political power without necessarily calling on the latter to address systemic and structural oppressions, relying instead on the patina of respectability created by these connections to encourage individual donations in support of actions that ultimately uphold the status quo.

Curiously, however, all incarnations of the book, as well as any links to the extant version of *Ravished Armenia*, are absent from the NEF’s website, nor is there any mention of the film on the organization’s autobiographical timeline. This may be due to the racial undercurrents and over-sexualization of the violence in the film, or to the NER’s arguably abusive treatment of Mardiganian, who, after being asked to relive her trauma ad nauseam, was sent to a convent school, where she became suicidal and ran away, while Henry and Eleanor Gates (the film’s screenwriter and Mardiganian’s legal guardian, respectively) hired seven look-alikes to travel to screenings in Mardiganian’s place, and pocketed all monies owed to her (Slide 2014). Arguably, this serves as an example of what Elizabeth Coffman would call a negative impact within a documentary’s authorial team. In her essay “Spinning a Collaborative Web: Documentary Projects in the Digital Arena,” Coffman argues that impact in the social-issues documentary field applies not only to audiences but also to documentary subjects and makers as well, in the sense that they are impacted and affected by participation in the documentary’s making. While Coffman is making a case that transparency in production and “the transformative nature of what happens before, during, and after production” is part of how twenty-first century audiences evaluate a documentary, that so much of the publicity campaign around *Ravished Armenia* focused on the transformative nature of Near East Relief’s work shows that such apparent transparency has long been used as a means of generating and mobilizing affect (Coffman 2014, 113). Moreover, that Mardiganian herself featured so prominently in so much of the film’s promotion and publicity campaigns, and that the film, while arguably no longer ing her own experiences, was nonetheless based on them and promoted as such, positions her quite firmly as part of the film’s authorial team. In this sense, then, I argue that while the film predates the existence of “documentary” as a concept, that the after-effects of Mardiganian’s participation in the film were kept well-hidden, and that any quantified metric as to the film’s success as a fundraiser remains a mystery to this day (the figures cited by Slide being unsubstantiated), the idea that audiences would judge a film’s worthiness based in part on how its production was perceived to impact its makers and participants is not new—and, in fact, that the true nature of Mardiganian’s experience with the

film was kept hidden speaks to the potential of so-called transformative impact being carefully staged as part of a feel-good publicity campaign.

Regardless, that the film has been mostly lost, and the current version in circulation online is an assemblage of fragments of *Ravished Armenia* and various newsreel segments, compiled and restored by the Armenian Genocide Resource Center (Slide 2014, 29), is an equally likely explanation for its absence from the Near East Foundation website (if not a satisfactory explanation for its absence from the Foundation's historical timeline). *Ravished Armenia* does, however, show up in the Foundation's digital archive. Examples of print ads for the film are readily available using the simple keyword "armenia," and *Ravished Armenia* is briefly discussed as a successful fundraising campaign drawing on the visual iconography of Near East Relief's earlier campaigns in a short documentary about the latter, titled *Lest They Perish*, and posted to the Foundation's Vimeo and Facebook pages.

Equally curious is the seeming absence of contemporary celebrity spokespeople for the Near East Foundation. *Ravished Armenia*—the book, the film, and the sideshow—all made Aurora Mardigian a prominent figure, for better or for worse; much of Near East Relief's credibility as well as the film's publicity and advertising rested on its association with powerful public figures and socialites; and, following this project, Near East Relief collaborated with child star Jackie Coogan to organise a food drive. While there are still some well-known names involved with the Foundation—in addition to Egoan's contributions to Slide's work, Queen Noor of Jordan sits on the Foundation's President's Council, (Near East Foundation n.d.) and both Amal Clooney and her husband lead initiatives for two of the Foundation's partners (Aurora Prize n.d.)—their participation is kept surprisingly low-key given that both the marketing around *Ravished Armenia* and the Foundation's current online presence relies on connections to those in social and/or political power as a legitimating tactic, that the Foundation's primary outreach efforts remain in moving image and other visual media created as part of fundraising campaigns, and that fundraising based on these social/political connections and the affective mobilizations generated by the Foundation's media output remains their sole call to action. In particular, videos celebrating the Foundation's current projects feature the individuals who directly benefit from these projects, in a bid to encourage viewers to participate financially, and are the primary media immediately available on the Foundation's website. The Foundation's Facebook page, meanwhile, is mainly used as a platform for sharing photos of and links to things associated with their projects, as well as—in a move reminiscent of the inclusion of politicians' and other prominent figures' names in print ads and publicity for *Ravished Armenia*—keeping potential donors apprised of the Foundation's proximity to power by posting updates from White House events. While images of the Clooneys and other celebrities do appear in some of these photos, they are nearly never named in the Foundation's posts, only in the occasional headline of media coverage being shared (Foundation n.d.). Furthermore, while Kim Kardashian made headlines in September 2016 for taking out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* denouncing a Turkish group of Armenian genocide deniers (Maya Oppenheim 2016), and also a year prior for visiting Armenia on what was marked as the hundredth anniversary of the genocide and devoting several episodes of her TV show to this (Walker 2015), she is not mentioned once on any of the Foundation's online properties despite being arguably one of the three most famous Armenians in twenty-first century eurowestern pop culture. Ultimately, this points to a desire to emphasize an image of connectivity with public figures seen as being of a higher class (the widespread classist, misogynistic derision of Kim Kardashian in particular cannot be overlooked here) in order to continue the Foundation's legacy of being endorsed by those perceived as holding higher moral authority, as much as it points to a desire to emphasize the Foundation's work.

Conclusion

The Near East Foundation's moving image media output comes full circle with the news of an upcoming documentary about the Foundation's history, to be narrated by Victor Garber, and whose sole creative force appears to be the Executive Producer, a private individual described as having a professional life in finance—in other words, the title of Executive Producer, the function of director, and overall control of the film have been given to a very generous donor (*They Shall Not Perish* n.d.). By comparison, a 2017 Hollywood

film titled *The Promise* (dir. Terry George) set in Constantinople in 1915 and also featuring a white American (this time male) as saviour, also lists a prominent Armenian-American non-professional with ties to another Armenian non-profit organization as a producer, alongside an Academy Award-winning director and a slew of other filmmaking professionals (*The Promise* n.d).⁵ In the age of crowdfunding activist documentaries, it is not unusual to give producer credits to non-professionals, nor is it unusual for first-time filmmakers to turn to crowdfunding, particularly for activist filmmaking. However, taken with the Foundation's continual linking of itself with those who hold social and/or political power, in 1919 as much as today, it does raise the question of whether such films can be said to be activist works if their activism is implicit, if they serve specific and potentially oppressive agendas, if they are hidden behind a celebration of an organization's history or activities, and when that organization's calls to action remain limited to neoliberal appeals to individual donors rather than agitating for broader, systemic changes.

This question is intensified when looking at the projects represented on the Foundation's website, and thinking about how we measure (and define) impact, as well as about Andrea Smith's writings on the non-profit industrial complex. As Smith explains, many of the foundations currently underwriting this non-profit work, including cross-platform activist media projects, exist primarily to generate tax deductions and public goodwill for the corporations and/or billionaires they represent, many of which are ultimately responsible for the very conditions and structures of oppression that activist groups work in resistance to (Smith 2007, 1-18). With that in mind, it then becomes in the foundations' best interests to divert activist energies away from working to realize radical possibilities that threaten the status quo, and this is best accomplished by professionalizing social movements via the requirements of grant writing, impact assessments, and so on. In the case of *Ravished Armenia*, this is apparent when taking into account the bigger picture of genocide survivors being asked to re-enact their trauma for a colonial, Orientalist gaze, endorsed by people holding a fair amount of social and political power, in the name of raising funds from individual donors to support the work of, essentially, Christian missionaries operating within refugee camps established and operated by other non-profit agencies, as well as all the administrative and other bureaucratic work that that implies, all the while reinforcing a white supremacist, Islamophobic worldview—inarguably not contributing to the dismantling of structures of oppression in any way.

In this sense, that the Near East Foundation's main projects at the moment are focused on micro-economic development certainly looks nice on the surface, in that it allows for the production of videos and other media showing potential donors an actual human who has tangibly benefited from previous donations. In an era where rumours about how much money actually goes into programs or services offered by non-profit organisations abound, demonstrating this kind of direct impact on individuals is a savvy public relations move distracting from the larger problems inherent in neoliberal frameworks. (That the Near East Foundation actually receives more than three times as much from government funding as from private donors raises the question of how government funding agencies are measuring impact—a question best suited to a longer project.)

The projects described in the Foundation's videos tend towards solutions that see individuals in unstable regions supported in some kind of entrepreneurial project as a way of making their lives more tolerable under the present socio-political circumstances they are experiencing—in other words, the Foundation has (ironically) returned to relief work, albeit by a different name. Perhaps best exemplified by a project in which a Palestinian olive mill engineer is placed in economic partnership with an Israeli olive farmer (“An Olive Peace”), these projects, by offering their beneficiaries the promise of a marginally better life *right now*, effectively shift those beneficiaries' energies away from imagining and working towards more radical possible futures, while giving the Foundation permission to continue addressing only the effects of injustice rather than the injustice itself. In that sense, these projects serve as a microeconomic version of the dynamic Smith describes in unpacking how foundations ultimately serve to redirect activist energies into upholding capitalist-colonial status quos. Finally, by presenting these projects, which focus on individuals, as actually being a solution to the problem, the Foundation essentially sends a message that larger social or structural injustices are best solved through individual coping mechanisms rather than through any actual social or structural change, thus situating itself firmly in what Sherry Ortner describes as the “neoliberal landscape” (Ortner 2017, 531).

Thinking this through in context with *Ravished Armenia*, and the contemporaneous emergence of the US as a world superpower, I argue that the white saviourism displayed by the film and its paratext, compounded by American exceptionalism and the nature of Near East Relief's actual relief work, could only have produced a neoliberal project that both leveraged and reaffirmed individuals' senses of moral and racial superiority in viewing the film and/or contributing to Near East Relief. Taken with the Near East Foundation's use of visual and online media today, as well as its efforts to maintain ties to and participate in dominant power structures, raises the question of whether relying on neoliberal do-good impulses—in which individuals are positioned as the best and only solution to a structural problem—to reinforce a specific vision of morality and solicit donations in the process is necessarily the best way to engage with and mobilize audiences, regardless of political perspective. Asking this question in turn brings into question the role of the filmmaker, the ways impact can be defined and measured (or if it can at all), and how activism can be defined—all questions which continue to influence discourse within the eurowestern activist documentary community.

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Endnotes

- 1 It should be noted that Slide does not provide any source for this figure, and also miscalculates its worth in current dollars as being \$2.5 billion.
- 2 It is also worth noting that the Foundation's annual reports, all available online, repeat these case studies in static "print" form, accompanied by a heavy dose of the kinds of data visualization endemic in impact reports and favoured by funders.
- 3 While a comparison of representational politics between *Ravished Armenia* and Egoyan's 2002 film *Ararat* would make for an interesting study, it is beyond the scope of this project. Moreover, a great deal has already been written about the representational politics of Egoyan's film. As a starting point, please see: Adam Mueller, 2016, "Genocide and the Arts: Creativity, Morality and the Representation of Traumatic Experience," in *Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians: One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation*, edited by Joceline Chabot et. al., 16-35, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Elke Heckner, 2010, "Screening the Armenian Genocide: Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* between Erasure and Suture," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 133-45; and Lisa Siraganian, 2007, "Telling a Horror Story, Conscientiously: Representing the Armenian Genocide from *Open House* to *Ararat*," in *Image and territory: Essays on Atom Egoyan*, edited by Monique Tschofen and Jennifer Burwell, 133-156, Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007.

4 It is worth noting here that Turkish persecution of Armenians began in the mid-19th century, with massacres occurring from 1894-96, in 1909, and again in 1915 and 1916, with mass incarcerations continuing until the 1920s. It is the massacres of 1915 and 1916 that are referred to as “the Armenian genocide.”

5 It is worth noting that this film is also a fundraiser for various unnamed non-profits “fighting genocide and injustice around the world,” according to the social impact part of the film’s site. It is also worth noting that according to both *The Independent* and *Deadline*, Armenian genocide deniers launched a campaign that saw the film receive over 55,000 one-star reviews on IMDb, mostly from men located in Turkey, after only three public screenings at the Toronto International Film Festival. See Hooton 2016 and Busch 2016.