# Diasporic *Flânerie*: From Armenian *Ruinenlust* to Armenia's Walkscapes

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In a famous review of Franz Hessel's *On Foot in Berlin*, entitled "The Return of the *Flâneur*" (1929), Walter Benjamin celebrates *flânerie* as a challenge to nationalistic views of history:

> And isn't [Rome] too full of temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines to be able to enter undivided into the dreams of the passer-by, along with every paving stone, every shop sign, every flight of steps, and every gateway? The great reminiscences, the historical *frissons*—these are all so much junk to the *flâneur*, who is happy to leave them to the tourist. And he would be happy to trade all his knowledge of artists' quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile—that which any old dog carries away.[1]

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Return of the *Flâneur*, 1929," in *Selected Writings II 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press Benjamin 1999), 263–265.

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Here the *flâneur* is unmoved by restored ruins and the nationalist narratives they embody: the "temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines" as well as "the great reminiscences, the historical *frissons*," and all "knowledge of artists' quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces." Indeed by leaving this "junk" to the "tourist," the *flâneur* reveals the fetish character of commodified, nationalist memory. Rejecting routes he has been told to take—in which "even dreaming is forced to move along streets that are too well paved"—the *flâneur* takes the risk of getting lost. As a result, he learns a love for the everyday and the apparently incidental: "every paving stone, every shop sign, every flight of steps, and every gateway," "the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile—that which any old dog carries away." *Flânerie* thus shifts one's perspective: from heroic history and architectural masterpieces to unplanned, quotidian encounters with all that has been ignored and forgotten. What is more, the *flâneur*'s scavenging is neither a solipsistic retreat from the world nor a light amusement for the well-heeled. On the contrary, as Benjamin goes on to say, *flânerie* monstrously unsettles prevailing social and cultural norms: "we can gauge the extent of the prevailing resistance to *flânerie* in Berlin, and see with what bitter and threatening expressions both things and people pursue the dreamer. It is here, not in Paris, where it becomes clear to us how easy it is for the *flâneur* to depart from the ideal of the philosopher out for a stroll, and to assume the features of the werewolf at large in the social jungle."[2] By wandering awry, the *flâneur* wakes from the collective dream of nationalist greatness and finds other dreams that are at once more conflictual and more open to alterity. *Flânerie* emerges here as a radical historicism. It leaves aside nostalgia for putatively perfect pasts, evades the normative desire for a nationalist future, and inspires other routes toward as yet unknown modes of political belonging.[3]

[2] Benjamin, "Return of the *Flâneur*," 265.

[3] I would distinguish the *flâneur* of "The Return of the *Flâneur*" from that of Benjamin's other famous account of *flânerie*, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," although I will not be able elaborate this distinction here. One would need, at the very least, to consider the pride of place Benjamin assigns to Baudelaire's poem "*Á Une Passante*": "Amid the deafening traffic of the town,/ Tall, slender, in deep mourning, with majesty,/ A woman passed, raising, with dignity/ In her poised hand, the flounces of her gown;/ Graceful, noble, with a statue's form./ And I drank, trembling as a madman thrills,/ From her eyes, ashen sky where brooded storm,/ The softness that fascinates, the pleasure that kills./ A flash … then

In this chapter, I show how the Benjaminian *flâneur*'s critique of restored ruins, the historical narratives they buttress, and the ways of being in the world they presume can unsettle an especially powerful element of the Armenian diaspora's discourse on Genocide: what in German is called *Ruinenlust*, or the melancholic love of ruins and the manic efforts to recognize, restore, and repair them. In the Armenian diasporic context, however, *Ruinenlust* is more than just a passion for literal ruins from Armenia's presumptive golden age of church building; it is a persistent political ontology. The diaspora's frequent fascination with the ruins of Armenian culture's distant past scattered throughout Turkey, Armenia, and the wider Mediterranean world carries a capacious presumption about Being in the wake of a catastrophic history: that one can only be fully human once what was shattered by genocide is made whole. While this fascination does not characterize every diasporan's view of ruins, and while the nationalism *Ruinenlust* at once enables and justifies is not everywhere uncritically embraced, I want to suggest that it is all too pervasive.[4] One can see this fascination in Armenian cultural representations from the elite to the kitsch as well as in well-funded international efforts aimed at generating the very cultural tourism Benjamin's *flâneur* disdains.

This political ontology is perhaps most succinctly captured by the refrain of Los Angeles Armenian alt metal band System of a Down's late 1990s hit genocide song "P.L.U.C.K": "A whole race Genocide... Recognition, Restoration, Reparation."[5] No doubt there is justice in

night!—O lovely fugitive,/ I am suddenly reborn from your swift glance;/ Shall I never see you till eternity?/ Somewhere, far off! Too late! never, perchance!/ Neither knows where the other goes or lives;/ We might have loved, and you knew this might be!" To the extent that the *Arcades Project* was envisioned as itself a kind of *flânerie*, it is perhaps closer to the "The Return of the *Flâneur*," though an elaboration of that connection is also beyond the scope of the present chapter.

[4] I want to acknowledge important, critical work being done by scholars of pre-modern Armenian architecture. See for instance Andrzej Piotrowski, "Heresy, Hybrid Buildings, and a Geography of Architectural Traditions," *TDSR* 27, no. 1 (2015): 7–19. See also Christina Maranci's insightful study, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015). Important groundwork for this recent critical scholarship was also set by Nina Garsoian and Sirarpie Der Nersessian. For a brief assessment of the comparative and cross-cultural dimension of scholarship on Armenian art and architecture, see also Sebouh Aslanian's chapter in this volume (Chap. 5).

[5] From http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/P-L-U-C-K-lyrics-System-of-a-Down/ 080717695055ECE8482568B000295763. Accessed July 18, 2017. System of a Down

the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide that claimed so many of our ancestors' lives, mine included. However, the call for recognition, restoration, and reparation too often ends up chasing much more normative and fantasmatic aims. The risk of this refrain is the narrow vision of political belonging in which the song sets it: a nationalist vision ("an entire nation") said to be shattered among ruins that figure genocidal loss ("watch them all fall down"), ruins whose restoration in turn figures a recognition that will make the nation whole again ("now it's time for restitution"). We must ask fundamental questions about this vision. Recognition: from whom are we seeking recognition, and what are we asking them to recognize? Restoration: what exactly do we think such recognition will restore? Reparation: who will be excluded from that repaired whole? As it turns out, Armenian nationalist visions that circulate in the diaspora often invent the tradition they seek to have recognized and restored, projecting a normative, contemporary ideal of what was lost into the past and then chasing its return in an impossible and endless game of repairing that which never existed in the first place. Inevitably, that normative ideal is held together by Islamophobia, racism, heteronormativity, and gender conformism. The figures of the invariably murderous Turk, the inevitably righteous Armenian Church, the passively victimized Armenian woman, the tragically heroic Armenian man, and the broken heterosexual family populate diasporan narratives that purport to show how an ancient nation was nearly destroyed and must be restored, just like the famously ruined churches in Ani.

How might diasporans undo these constraints and imagine alternative belongings that address the diversity of our varied contemporary worlds, which have little to do with the misty and mystified pasts we project into the ruins?[6] We might begin by taking inspiration from the perspectival

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played a famous concert in Yerevan in 2015, where many of these themes of loss, mourning, and nationalism converged.

[6] For kindred efforts to pose this question, and accounts of cultural and historical texts that offer their own, heterodox answers, see: David Kazanjian, "Kinships Past, Kinship's Futures," *Getuigen: Tussen Geschiedenis en Herinnering/Testimony: Between History and Memory* 120, no. 1 (April 2015): 103–111; Kazanjian, "re *storation*: Aikaterini Gegisian's *A Small Guide to the Invisible Seas*," *Armenity*, Catalogue of the Armenian Pavilion for the Venice Biennale (Milan: Skira Editore, 2015), 60–63; Kazanjian, "re *cognition*: Nina Katchadourian's *Accent Elimination*," *Armenity*, 72–75; Kazanjian, "re *paration*: Sarkis's 'Respiro,'" *Sarkis: Respiro*, Catalogue of the Turkish Pavilion for the Venice Biennale (Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for

shift Benjamin's *flâneur* offers. By leaving the familiar comforts of "the great reminiscences," wandering away from our "national shrines," and getting lost in the unfamiliarity of what has been left aside for "any old dog [to carry] away," we might displace our *Ruinenlust*. In turn, we might begin to notice heterodox efforts to represent the remains of genocide, efforts that wander beyond the "enclosed squares" of recognition, restoration, and reparation, efforts that attend to lives already thriving amongst unrestored ruins.

One such effort interests me in particular in this chapter: an experimental web and video project by Yerevan-based artist and activist Karen Andreassian, entitled "Ontological Walkscapes." This project takes the viewer into the ruins not of glorious and timeless classical Armenia, but rather into the ruins of Soviet Armenia's brutalist public spaces, where the romantic ideal of *Ruinenlust* is replaced by a cinematic stroll through neglected concrete spaces that have been repurposed by activists opposing the Armenian state's authoritarian rule. If the diaspora can learn to see and hear this vision coming from a space it has long deemed peripheral, and over which it too often lords its own opinions and resources, it might wander away from what it too confidently knows about itself. For the *flânerie* of "Ontological Walkscapes" unsettles who Armenians are and can be. And we in the North American diaspora, especially, need to

Culture and Arts and Yapı Kredi Publishing, 2015), 50–66; Kazanjian, "Re-flexion: Genocide in Ruins," *Discourse* 33, no. 3 (2011): 367–389; Kazanjian, "On Sound and Silence, 'in a place I'd never been before'", *Agos* (Istanbul), May 2011. See also: Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) [originally *La Perversion Historiographique: une réflexion arménienne* (Paris: Editions Lignes et Manifestes)]; Nichanian, "Catastrophic Mourning," trans. Jeff Fort, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 99–124; Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster, Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century, vol. 1, the National Revolution* (Princeton: Gomidas Institute, 2002); David Kazanjian and Marc Nichanian, "Between Genocide and Catastrophe," in *Loss*, 125–147. Additionally, see Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian, "From Somewhere Else: Egoyan's *Calendar*, Freud's *Rat Man*, and Armenian Diasporic Nationalism," *Third Text* 19, no. 2 (March 2005): 125–144; Kassabian and Kazanjian, "Melancholic Memories and Manic Politics: Feminism, Documentary, and the Armenian Diaspora," in *Feminism and Documentary,* ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 202–223; Kassabian and Kazanjian, "'You Have to Want to Be Armenian Here:' Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Problem of Armenian Diasporic Identity," *Armenian Forum* 1, no. 1 (1998): 19–36; Kassabian and Kazanjian, "Naming the Armenian Genocide: The Quest for Truth and a Search for Possibilities," in *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, ed. Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 33–55.

be unsettled. We who at times speak too much, too loudly, too confidently, and with too much money to Armenia, to Turkey, to international artistic and juridical institutions: of the past, of what it means, of what must be done with it. Instead of asserting the centrality of our North American diasporic voice and consequently casting other Armenian worlds into peripheries of our own making, what if we listened to and learned from artists like Andreassian, whose ex-Soviet milieu and intellectual roots in traditions like factography—which also influenced heterodox western Marxists like Benjamin—necessarily estrange us from selves forged in and through Western capitalism and the US imperial side of the Cold War?

I hope to show here how the *flânerie* of Andreassian's "Ontological Walkscapes" can guide us from Armenian diasporic *Ruinenlust* to virtual *spazierend* amongst the ruins of post-Soviet Armenia, offering a kind of *poiesis* for the Armenian diaspora: an imaginative remaking of being-in-the-world in the wake of catastrophic loss.

## Armenian Diasporic *Ruinenlust* as an Invented Tradition

Ruins. How are they known? What can we know of them? What do they know of us?

These questions have been posed incessantly since the Renaissance, when a pervasive European concern with the modern spurred a fascination about the crumbling past as that from which the modern differentiates itself as well as that which haunts the modern with its own, potentially ruined future. By the eighteenth century, Europe was in the grip of *Ruinenlust*. As Diderot wrote in 1767, at once describing and exemplifying this love of ruins:

> Our glance lingers over the debris of a triumphal arch, a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we retreat into ourselves; we contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter the rubble of the very buildings in which we live over the ground; in that moment solitude and silence prevail around us, we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more. Such is the first tenant of the poetics of ruins.[7]

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[7] Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art, II: The Salon of 1767*, trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 196.

Here, ruins are occasions for melancholic reflection. They tell "us" of our "solitude" as "survivors" of a "nation" long gone. They prompt solipsistic retreat. Their *poiesis* is desultory.[8]

With the national bourgeoisie's rise to hegemony in the capitalist world-system, Diderot's melancholic *Ruinenlust* took a manic turn: ruins became aesthetic sites seized by nationalist ideologies. Examples of this turn abound: from late eighteenth-century debates in the United States about the historical value of Indian burial grounds; to Gustave Doré's 1872 engravings of London's St. Paul Cathedral in ruins, as imagined by a future traveler from New Zealand; to the Gothic aesthetics of the nineteenth-century British parliament building; to Mexico's phantasmatic nineteenth- and twentieth-century restorations of Aztec and Maya pyramids in the name of national independence, *indigenismo*, and the tourist industry; to Spain's late twentieth-century sleight-of-hand by which medieval castles and forts became expensive hotels, or *paradores*, honoring the nation. This nationalist *Ruinenlust* is a prime example of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger famously dubbed an "invented tradition": "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."[9] Such invented traditions perform a retroactive sleight-of-hand: they craft a fictive, prior greatness and project it onto ruins so as to material-ize their loss.

Armenians in the North American diaspora often burn with a particular mode of *Ruinenlust*: the repetition of images of ruined churches and for-tresses designed to invoke a great past, its genocidal destruction, and the desire for its restoration. This is perhaps most familiar in the form of what might be called *Ruinenlust* kitsch: the ubiquitous wall calendar and web-site images that crowd restaurants, rug shops, and the virtual faces of our philanthropic institutions.[10] The ruins over which this genre obsesses are

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[8] For a recent argument in praise of the aesthetic experience of the ruin, which differs sig-nificantly from my approach here, see Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2004).

[9] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1983]), 1.

[10] This kitsch is elaborately challenged by Atom Egoyan's brilliant film *Calendar*, which I have discussed at length elsewhere. See Kazanjian, "Re-flexion: Genocide in Ruins;" Kazanjian and Kassabian "From Somewhere Else."

extremely delimited. They are almost always medieval and pastoral: restored stone structures set in natural landscapes emptied of people.

These popular cultural artefacts do not invoke the urban detritus that so interests Benjamin's *flâneur*.[11] Rather, as mass-produced commodities they function metonymically by insisting over and over that one, rarefied aspect of Armenian culture—churches built during the post-classical and medieval periods in present-day Turkey and Armenia—ought to organize normative diasporan identity. That these churches are typically in ruins, particularly when they are located in Turkey, saturates that identity in loss. Visually, then, they conform to the logic of System of a Down's famous refrain, which I mentioned above: "recognition, restoration, reparation." That is, they hail Armenians to identify with a historically and culturally limited field recoded as timeless, essential, and wounded, and they rally Armenians to heal that wound.

Yet *Ruinenlust*'s material reach extends well beyond the diaspora's walls and websites. Take our culture industry. The diaspora invests a significant amount of its considerable resources on projects that, as Hobsbawm and Ranger put it, "seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past": the restoration of those very ancient, religious ruins as well as the exhibition of classical art. For instance, the Noravank' monastery near Yeghegnadzor, Armenia, which dates to the thirteenth century, was restored with funds from USAID/Armenia and the VIVACell/MTS corporation (Armenia's leading telecommunications company), in collaboration with a non-governmental organization called the Armenian Monuments Awareness Project (AMAP) whose funding sources flow from the diaspora and the Armenian government (see Figs. 11.1 and 11.2).

In the words of a USAID official who toured the organization's projects in Armenia, the meliorist ideal of development projects like Noravank' knows no limits:

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[11] As Michael Pifer pointed out to me, the totalizing and homogeneous past this narrow selection of ruins constructs leaves little room for the ambiguous complexity of Armenian history, and certainly evades any account of the contemporary ruination of spaces in which Armenians are implicated, either as residents or as citizens of countries whose militaries are making more ruins every day. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/world/middleeast/aleppo-destruction-drone-video.html. Accessed November 11, 2016.
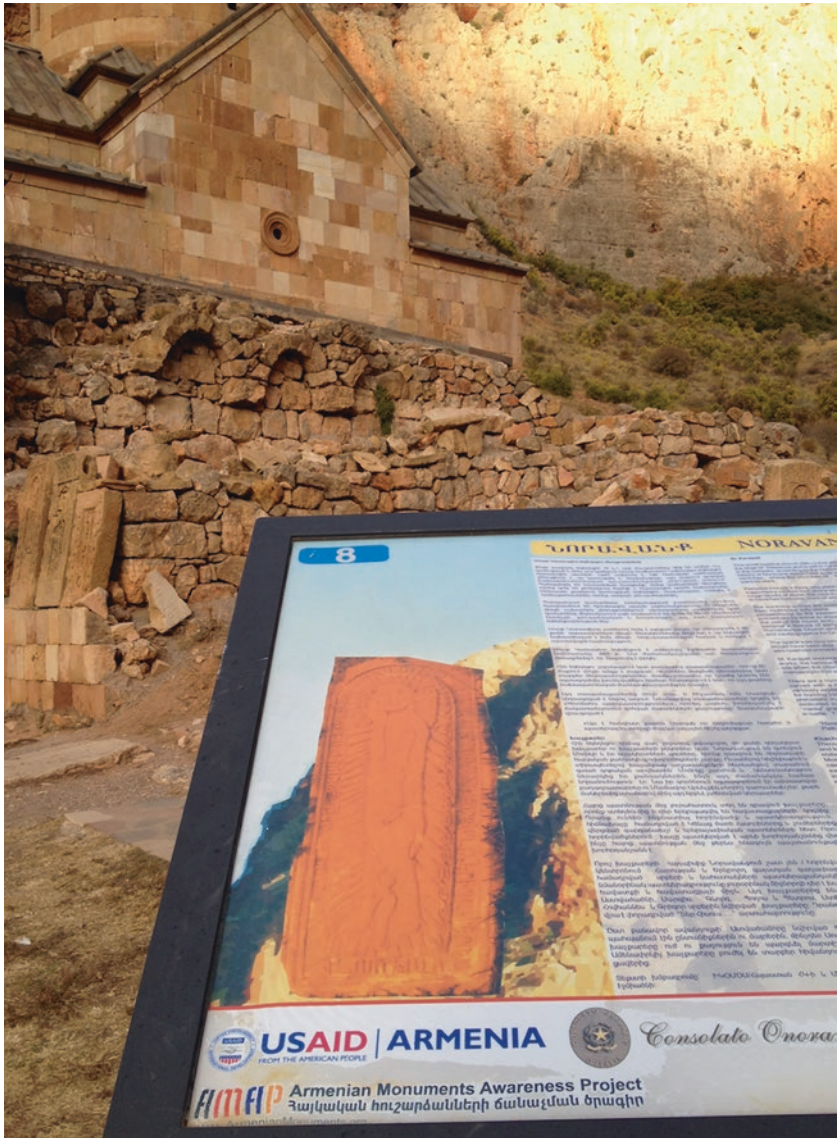
**Fig. 11.1** The Thirteenth-Century Noravankʻ Monastery, sponsored by USAID, author's photos

**Fig. 11.2** The Thirteenth-Century Noravank' Monastery, sponsored by VivaCell/MTS, author's photos

Tourism in Armenia has grown strongly overall in the past five years despite the global financial crisis. In 2009, Armenia welcomed 575,281 international tourists. The sector has grown by more than 16% per year for the last five years. The road to the monasteries wound through breathtaking canyons full of birds and rare trees and flowers. I had lunch in a cave where local people prepared a chicken barbeque and the Armenian flat bread "lavash" over a pit. There is much for visitors to explore and experience in Armenia.[12]

International capital appears here in the familiar guise of a host amicably introducing the global to the local, without mention of tourism's power to undermine local economies, or the ongoing and conflictual political impact of the diaspora on Armenian civil society. As AMAP explains in its 2012 call for new corporate sponsors of projects like the construction of signage at Noravank':

For the new year we will be replacing older boards with newer, more robust materials, and replacing sponsor brands with those of our new donors. Though this is a donation project that focuses on the social benefits of promoting Armenian heritage, it also provides a unique marketing opportunity to promote your services inside cultural monuments to a dedicated audience of customers acquainting your brand with the culture. It is a deep-rooted positive connection that other types of marketing cannot provide.[13]

By "deeply rooting" its marketing in the passion of *Ruinenlust*, international capital deftly articulates surplus-value extraction with the "invented tradition" of a thirteenth-century ruin ahistorically repurposed as the emblem of a nation whose Caucasian state was founded some seven centuries later: first in 1918 and again, after the Soviet period, in 1991. AMAP's signs thus point the way not simply to Noravank' as an example of "Armenian heritage"; they also direct the diaspora's traveling international bourgeoisie into the sphere of invented traditions.

Here we have a neo-liberal return of the tourist Benjamin distinguishes from Hessel's *flâneur*. Yet, one should not simply dismiss AMAP's invocation

[12] See http://blog.usaid.gov/2010/08/usaid-supports-armenian-governments-tourism-efforts-to-boost-economic-growth/. Accessed November 11, 2016.
[13] See http://www.armenianmonuments.org/en/2012proposal. Accessed November 11, 2016.

of this "deep-rooted positive connection" as an ideological surface covering a more fundamental economic interest. To the extent that the material practices of *Ruinenlust* reiteratively reconstruct the nation's invented traditions, they also carry an ontological promise for an Armenian nationalism that took hold in the wake of the Catastrophe that befell Armenians as the Ottoman Empire was violently transformed into the Turkish nation-state: the promise that a ruined people will somehow be repaired and restored once what has widely come to be known as the Armenian genocide is recognized by the international community and Turkey itself.

As such, diasporic *Ruinenlust* becomes a component of a discursive practice Marc Nichanian, drawing on Jacques Derrida, has dubbed "the historiographic perversion."[14] For Nichanian, positivist, historiographic efforts to prove the Armenian genocide not only fail in their efforts to prove; they rather fail to understand genocide's most potent force: "genocide is not a fact because it is the very destruction of fact, of the notion of fact, of the factuality of fact."[15] As an event that involved not just mass killing, but also a concerted historiographic effort to conceal or destroy its own archival traces, genocide is paradoxically "something that may not have occurred as fact. Or worse: that something has occurred as the very negation of the fact as such."[16] Uniquely resistant to historiographic reparation, genocide is thus a "limit-experience," "the limit-experience of the Catastrophe within language."[17] This is sharply so in the case of the Armenians, whose Catastrophe unfolded many decades before even the word "genocide" itself was coined by Raphael Lemkin and institutionalized within international law during the 1930s and 1940s.[18] While this

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[14] For the phrase "historiographic perversion," see Jacques Derrida, "The Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson. 3–67. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 60.

[15] Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, 1.

[16] Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, 2.

[17] Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, 7.

[18] For his 1930s work, before coining the word "genocide," see Raphael Lemkin, "Acts Constituting a General (Transnational) Danger Considered as Offences against the Law of Nations," trans. Jim Fussell, www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/madrid1933-english.html, originally published in French as "Les actes constituant un danger general (interétatique) consideres comme delites des droit des gen," *Expilications additionelles au Rapport spécial présentè à la V-me Conférence pour l'Unification du Droit Penal à Madrid* (14–2 O.X. 1933), *Librarie de la cour d'appel ed de l'order de advocates* (Paris: A. Pedone, 13 Rue Soufflot, 1933), and in German as "Akte der Barbarei und des Vandalismus als *delicta juris gentium*,"

Catastrophe was unfolding, it was given names that we have learned to forget, names eclipsed by the more historiographically and legally oriented category of genocide. Nichanian writes:

> there is also a history of the name in the case of the extermination of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. At the very beginning, around 1919, the proper name of the event was rather *Yeghern*, which, in its common form, more or less means "pogrom" and was already the word one used to designate the planned series of massacres of 1895 in Eastern Anatolia as well as those of 1909 in the Adana region…But terminology was not fixed, and other words were also used as proper names. In the familial context, the most current name was *Ak'sor,* which, as a common name, means "exile" or "deportation." And then, from 1931 on, another name appeared as a proper name: *Aghed*. It is the common word for "catastrophe"…[19]

This forgetting of the names the Catastrophe had before "genocide" reminds us of the elements of this event that defy efforts to prove its eventness, to establish its facticity. I want to suggest that the discursive practice of *Ruinenlust* is part of this system, that it works more *within* what Nichanian calls "the historiographic perversion" than apart from or against it.

American freelance writer and photographer Russ Juskalian exemplifies this problematic in a 2012 *New York Times* travel section article about visiting Nagorno-Karabakh. As he explains, because his grandmother fled the early twentieth-century genocide in eastern Anatolia, he feels a "personal" attachment to this southern Caucasus region—apparently despite the geographic, linguistic, and cultural differences that have long separated the two regions. Linking this aspirational attachment to a heartfelt ambivalence about Armenia's ongoing war with Azerbaijan, Juskalian writes: "I was hoping not just to understand more about this little-known area, but also to understand more about my own background…To come to Nagorno-Karabakh, a place where Armenians

*Anwaltsblatt Internationales* 19, no. 6 (Vienna, November 1933): 117–119. For his 1940s work, in which he coins the word "genocide," see Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 69–95; Lemkin, "Genocide—A Modern Crime," *Free World* 4 (April,1945): 39–45; Lemkin, "Genocide as a Crime under International Law," *American Journal of International Law* 41, no. 1 (1947). For a more recent return to Lemkin's work, see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

[19] Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, 7.

have asserted their right to live freely—but at the cost of having forcibly removed their Azeri neighbors—generated mixed emotions, to say the least."[20] This profoundly critical perspective on the search for confirmation of national identity comes from a certain *flânerie*. In acknowledging the militarism that drives the ongoing war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Juskalian gets lost, wandering off the "too well paved" route all diasporans are expected to travel from the acknowledgment of loss to the confirmation of a shared national identity with all its normative force. Yet that wander is quickly corrected by an Armenian cab driver, or at least by Juskalian's interpretation of that cab driver's words:

> Over the next few days we hired a taxi, so we could see more of the region's Armenian ruins. There was the white-stone Amaras monastery, swathed in knee-high grasses and the occasional wild poppy plant; the 13th-century Gandzasar monastery, whose walls and floor, some believe, contain the head of John the Baptist, the jaw of Gregory the Illuminator and the right hand of St. Zachariah; and Dadivank, where immense Armenian steles known as khachkars, some over 1,000 years old, stood in repose. At one point, while traveling on the Stepanakert-Martakert Highway in a battered taxi, I saw the ruins of stone buildings. "Agdam?" I asked the driver. "Agdam," he answered, quietly. "No photo." Agdam had been an Azeri village that the Armenians had razed during the war. Some 40,000 people fled, and many were killed. As hundreds of abandoned homes, many reduced to foundations, came into view, the driver stepped hard on the gas.[21]

There must be no record of these ruins, made by Armenians themselves; the diasporan ought not wander there, for they do not fall along national identity tourist's route. Ultimately, as with the "tourist" of whom Benjamin writes, as well as the "visitors" imagined by the USAID and AMAP reports I discussed above, for Juskalian "the great reminiscences, the historical frissons," and a "deep-rooted positive connection" flow from the "temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines" he tours. Nagorno-Karabakh becomes Juskalian's Rome, then: historically grand and volatile, beautifully broken, the very condition of possibility for personal restoration—*Ruinenlust.*

Just as System of a Down's manic cry for "recognition, restoration, reparation" transforms *Ruinenlust* into an ontology, so too can Juskalian's version

[20] http://travel.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/travel/off-the-map-in-nagorno-karabakh-a-region-in-the-southern-caucasus.html?pagewanted=all. Accessed November 11, 2016.

[21] http://travel.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/travel/off-the-map-in-nagorno-karabakh-a-region-in-the-southern-caucasus.html?pagewanted=all. Accessed November 11, 2016.

of what Benjamin calls "the dreams of the passer-by" become an even more frighteningly consequential mode-of-being. Consider a 2008 article entitled "Bones" published in the *New York Times Magazine* by Peter Balakian, the American author and poet perhaps best known for his popular 1997 genocide memoir *Black Dog of Fate*. Recounting a U.S. State Department sponsored visit he made to Der Zor in Syria to see the region's ruins and seek out traces of Armenian history, Balakian quite matter-of-factly describes how he found, pocketed, and smuggled out of the country not only rocky remnants of supposedly ancient buildings, but also human bones he supposedly uncovered in an area his guide told him was a desert burial ground for Armenians killed during the genocide. Balakian writes:

> I put my hand in the dirt, grazing the ground, and came up with hard white pieces. "Our ancestors are here," I muttered. Then I began, without thinking, picking up handfuls of dirt, sifting out the bones and stuffing them in my pockets. I felt the porous, chalky, dirt-saturated, hard, intangible stuff in my hands. A piece of hip socket, part of a skull. Nine decades later. I filled my pockets with bones, compelled to have these fragments with me…On the plane back to the United States, I kept waking and sleeping. It wasn't until we were over Labrador that I realized I was carrying organic matter from another country…As I stood in line at customs at Kennedy Airport, I remembered my State Department hosts telling me that, because of where I'd been, they might want to check my bags. But the customs agent looked at my passport, looked at me, then stamped the passport and said, "Welcome back."[22]

When I asked Balakian about this story after a reading he gave in 2011 at the University of Pennsylvania, he declared that he garnered a certain satisfaction at being able, as he put it, to "return" these remains to the United States.[23] In what sense did he mean "return"? Even if they were what his guide told them they were, these would have been bones of people for whom the United States could not have been farther from "home." Balakian performs a remarkable alchemy here, fueled by *Ruinenlust*: what many would call grave-robbing by a gullible traveler becomes, in the eyes

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[22] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/magazine/07lives-t.html. Accessed November 11, 2016.

[23] Personal Communication, November 8, 2011. For a video recording of part of this event, see https://media.sas.upenn.edu/watch/123181; for an audio recording, see https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Balakian/Balakian-Peter_A-Poetry-Reading_KWH-Upenn_11-08-2011.mp3. Accessed November 11, 2016.

of the diasporan genocide memoirist, a passion for ruins that fortify a diasporic Armenian-American exceptionalism.[24] There is an arrogance to this suffering that diasporans would do well to learn how to unsettle.[25]

I have drawn these seemingly disparate cases together—the wall calendars, the Noravank' Monastery restoration, and Juskalian's and Balakian's articles—to bring into relief a widespread Armenian diasporic discourse on a putatively ruined identity that demands recognition, restoration, and reparation: a *Ruinenlust*. So let us question this discourse, drawing again from Benjamin's "The Return of the *Flâneur*." If the *Ruinenlust* of Juskalian's "knowledge of artists' quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces" speeds away from the more risky, potentially monstrous recognition of Armenian militarism, and Balakian's grave-robbing boldly embraces an exceptionalist, even arrogant ontology of suffering, then how might we, in the diaspora, learn to unsettle such *Ruinenlust*? How, that is, might we wander rather toward what Benjamin calls "the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile," toward "that which any old dog carries away"?

## Walkscapes

Yerevan-based artist Karen Andreassian's remarkable video project, called "Ontological Walkscapes," offers a profound and provocative answer to these questions, very much in the spirit of Benjamin's *flânerie*. This web-based documentary archive—which Andreassian calls "a long-term research project on socio-political landscapes and their potential infiltration"—is made up of a potentially endless series of short videos housed on a website that shows a sea of numbers carefully arranged in lines (see Fig. 11.3).[26]

The length of each video is determined by these numbers, which apparently are generated at random but governed by an algorithm that, we are told cryptically on the website, "reflect[s] the time interval between the two clicks in seconds." In the videos, which were shot by Andreassian, we view images of Soviet-era urban ruin and public spaces

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[24] Nanor Kebranian has also spoken eloquently about the horrors of Balakian's grave-robbing (unpublished paper delivered at the International Conference on the Armenian Diaspora, Boston University, February 2010).

[25] Thanks to Dillon Vrana for offering me the phrase "the arrogance of suffering."

[26] http://www.ontologicalwalkscapes.format.am/text.php?text=t8&image=s11. Accessed November 11, 2016. The project has also been assembled into a book with an attached CD showing the videos: Karen Andreassian, *Ontological Walkscapes* (Istanbul: 11th International Istanbul Biennial, 2009). For the Biennial's description of the project, see http://11b.iksv.org/sanatcilar_en.asp?sid=7. Accessed November 11, 2016.

**Ontological Walkscapes** / Project Description / Team

*[Dense numerical data grid with location markers including ○ Hrazdan >>, ○ Nor Hachn >>, ○ Yerevan >>, ○ Khachik >>]*

**Fig. 11.3** The "Ontological Walkscapes" Website, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

from across Armenia; traveling shots of an "expert," Steven Wright, lecturing on his impressions of the scenes; and other shots of people strolling through public spaces. These wanderers may be casual, but as the project description suggests they may also be conducting the kind of mobile political meetings that became popular in Armenia after the fraudulent elections of 2008 were followed by mass protest and the subsequent, violent state suppression of dissent. These mobile meetings are difficult for the police to distinguish from the casual strollers who customarily fill Armenia's city and town centers and, consequently, they have been more difficult to monitor or repress. We thus encounter what emerged from the convergence of "the slow disappearance of 1970s Soviet-Armenian architecture and the shrinkage of public spaces due to the construction boom; and the peaceful protests, which led to the forceful dispersion of the demonstrators during the last post-presidential

election at Azatutyoun [Freedom] Square."[27] Andreassian's project displaces the *Ruinenlust* of "temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines" with images of the ruins into which Soviet monumentality fell. In turn, it shows how those Soviet ruins are re-animated by a *flânerie* of quotidian sociality and mobile protest.

Indeed, this resonance with Benjamin and the Soviet past is not coincidental. As Andreassian explains on the website for "Ontological Walkscapes," he and his collaborators studied factography, a Soviet movement centered on Osip Brik, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Sergei Tretyakov's journals *LEF* (*Left Front of the Arts*) and *New LEF*. During the 1920s, factography challenged the presumptive truth claims of documentary realism and set for photography and film the task of generating experimental working class aesthetics that would actively transform rather than passively record the real.[28] Benjamin was also influenced by this movement, particularly by its anti-deterministic and anti-positivistic approach to new technologies and the representation of the present.[29] Drawing on Devin Fore and Viktor Pertsov, Andreassian particularly emphasizes how the factographers understood their cultural work "not as a static genre, but as a mode of praxis" in which "the fact is quite literally made" and "immediate life activity" is "popped" out of any merely utilitarian frame. Factography appealed to him and his collaborators because it "engaged not just with physical and dimensional bodies, but also with bodies of collective social knowledge and networks of communication," particularly as those bodies could be recorded by "the masses of worker-correspondents."[30]

Andreassian's walkscapes could thus be said to perform what Benjamin calls "the perfected art of the *flâneur*," "a knowledge of 'dwelling.'" For

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[27] http://basekamp.com/about/events/ontological-walkscapes. Accessed November 11, 2016.

[28] On factography, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (Autumn, 1984): 82–119. Devin Fore, "Soviet Factography: Production Art in an Information Age," *October* 118 (Fall 2006): 3–10; Natasha Kolchevska, "From Agitation to Factography: The Plays of Sergej Tret'jakov," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 388–403; Elizabeth Astrid Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

[29] See Fore, "Soviet Factography" and https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-48-1/soviet-factography-production-art-in-an-information-age/.

[30] For Andreassian's account of his relationship to factography, see http://www.ontological-walkscapes.format.am/text.php?text=t2&image=s10. Accessed November 11, 2016. Andreassian references Fore "Soviet Factography." The Viktor Pertsov reference is unclear to me, but one may turn to his first book, written at the height of New LEF's influence, *Tomorrow's Literature* (1929), as well as *The Writer and the New Reality* (1958).

according to Benjamin, Hessel's *On Foot in Berlin* raises not only the question of the quotidian stroll, but also the question of "what 'dwelling' means." The Berlin *flâneur* wanders the crossroads of an older set of dwellings, "with the idea of security at its core," and the new dwellings of Giedion, Mendelsohn, and Le Corbusier, who "are converting human habitations into the transitional spaces of every imaginable force and wave of light and air."[31] Hessel thus attends carefully to thresholds:

> …unassuming household gods on dusty landings, in nameless hall niches, the guardians of rites of passage who once served as presiding spirits every time someone stepped over a wooden or metaphorical threshold…Berlin has few gates, but he [the *flâneur*] is familiar with the lesser transitions, those that separate the city from the surrounding lowland, or one district from another: building sites, bridges, urban railway overpasses, and squares. They are all honored here and recorded, to say nothing of the transitional hours…[32]

This "knowledge of dwelling" is not so much an account of how to be *in* as it is an experience of passing *through* and a verging *upon* that refuses simply to leave behind where one has been. Quoting again from "The Return of the *Flâneur*": "If we recollect that not only people and animals but also spirits and above all images can inhabit a place, then we have a tangible idea of what concerns the *flâneur* and of what he looks for. Namely, images, wherever they lodge [*Nämlich die Bilder wo immer sie hausen*]."[33] The English translation here is fortuitous, for "lodge" can be taken both in the sense of "to reside" and in the sense of "to be arrested or intercepted in fall or progress; to 'stick' in a position."[34] This Berlin *flânerie* can be said to disrupt progress by lingering in the dust, wedging itself into over-familiar spaces to pry them open, and to wander across thresholds into the "force and wave of light and air." It is thus paradoxically recursive and open-ended, stuck and ongoing. It gets us lost, detaching us from our familiar, grand historicist narratives, and incites the possibility of a different relation between unsung pasts and unpredictable futures.

Andreassian's "Ontological Walkscapes" often proffer just this unsettling aesthetic. Let us consider in particular a set of seven videos, all of which were shot in Hrazdan, a provincial Armenian capital developed

[31] Benjamin, "The Return of the *Flâneur*," 264–265.
[32] Benjamin, "The Return of the *Flâneur*," 264–265.
[33] Benjamin, "The Return of the *Flâneur*," 264.
[34] Oxford English Dictionary Online.

during the Soviet years as an industrial center.[35] All run for 14 seconds or less and are marked on the "Ontological Walkscapes" website by a number corresponding to their length. They feature fixed-camera shots of urban spaces filled with 1970s-era structures poised on the brink of ruin during which one hears only ambient noise, primarily of wind gusting against the microphone and the occasional car or bird. The seven videos depict: first, a shot of a crumbling, cement overpass with a crumbling, empty cement pool in the foreground (7 seconds) (see Fig. 11.4);



**Fig. 11.4** Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 7 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

[35] Were there space, I should also like to consider another video linked to the "Ontological Walkscapes" project, one shot at a Yerevan bicycle race track. This video runs for 3 minutes and 14 seconds, and shows the banked race track and its grandstands with four shots from four different angles. Toward the end of each of the first two shots, the camera moves just slightly to the left; during the last two shots, people ride bikes along a flat, narrow, asphalt path that loops around the inside of the race track, separated from the track by a narrow strip of grass.

**Fig. 11.5** Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 12 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

second, the same overpass framed to the left by a tree (12 seconds) (see Fig. 11.5); third, an exterior wall of an abandoned, Soviet-era bus station along which run scores of cement columns spaced only a few feet apart (8 seconds) (see Fig. 11.6); fourth, a circular café in that station, wrapped in brutalist flying buttresses (5 seconds) (see Fig. 11.7); fifth, a set of cement and metal bollards crowded by weeds, backgrounded by the corner of the bus station building (14 seconds) (see Fig. 11.8); sixth, a shot from across a road busy with traffic showing the café and the bus station together, connected by a cement arch (6 seconds) (see Fig. 11.9); and seventh, the shortest video, showing the overpass, bus station, and café together, as a complex of dwellings (4 seconds) (see Fig. 11.10).

**Fig. 11.6** Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 8 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

These fleeting sequences are rife with the paradoxical potential of the *flâneur's* return. Fixed by the camera's lack of movement, they are also set in motion as video. Weighed down by immense quantities of gray cement, they also weightlessly rush past us in a matter of seconds, seemingly light enough for Benjamin's "old dog" to carry away. They return to iconic remnants of the Soviet era, staging the melancholia of a statist utopianism now abandoned to wind and weed; yet they also carry untold potential, as sites not only for reflection, but also for reclamation by the furtive, post-2008 mobile political meetings. We wonder what werewolves might stroll through these concrete jungles, these "building sites, bridges, urban railway overpasses, and squares" which might at any moment be bulldozed for redevelopment. By offering us the

**Fig. 11.7** Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 5 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

potential for popularly repurposing the ruins of a planned society, they interrupt early twentieth-century factography's own participation in Soviet-style modernization. As such, Andreassian's work fits into a vast realm of popular, oppositional culture that has thrived in the former Soviet states since the early 1990s, often in the face of vigorous repression.

For the North American Armenian diaspora I have invoked throughout this chapter, whose primary framework for the brutalist forms Andreassian films—the Cold War—no longer provides meaning, these videos *lodge* themselves into the ubiquitous still shots of ancient churches and fortresses populating *Ruinenlust* kitsch; into Juskalian's account of "Dadivank, where immense Armenian steles known as khachkars, some

**Fig. 11.8** Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 14 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

over 1,000 years old, stood in repose;" into Balakian's pockets, filled with "a piece of hip socket, part of a skull." They thus *arrest or intercept* the invented traditions of which Hobsbawm and Ranger write, the "overtly or tacitly accepted rules…which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition." The gusts of wind and hum of traffic one hears on these videos *wedge* their way into the incessant iterations of Armenian diasporic nationalism, offering a dissonant dispersal of System of a Down's relentlessly rhythmic refrain: "recognition, restoration, reparation." These sites will not defy "the global financial crisis" like USAID's development projects, for the closed café refuses to serve

**Fig. 11.9**   Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 6 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

the local charms of "chicken barbeque" or "lavash," and the scrubby trees and everyday chirps of urban birds defiantly fail to take a tourist's breath away. The videos' crumbling concrete provides no "unique marketing opportunity" to AMAP's donors, whose diasporan targets could never root a positive connection in rocky dirt alongside ubiquitous weeds.

Andreassian's fleeting, filmic Armenia unsettles the ontological fortitude of the diaspora's *Ruinenlust*. Which is to say, in "Ontological Walkscapes" what we are and what we want are undone rather than remade as "great reminiscences" or "historical *frissons*." This factographic return

**Fig. 11.10**    Still from Andreassian's short videos, "Ontological Walkscapes," 4 seconds, courtesy of Karen Andreassian

of *flânerie* thus refers "fact" to its etymological root: the Latin verb *facere* or "to make."[36] Posed in a visual idiom of becoming, it proffers an urgent interrogative: what might we make of these walkscapes, and what might they make of us?

[36] http://www.ontologicalwalkscapes.format.am/text.php?text=t2&image=s10.