

The Station of Fossil Man

Submitted by

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Abstract

My practice-led PhD dissertation consists of a primary component, a feature film screenplay, *The Station of Fossil Man* and an exegesis. The screenplay explores aspects of filmic narrative and the psychosexual behaviour of a man conflicted about his relationships with women. A double narrative flashback, the screenplay tells a story of a university lecturer whose dating of a striptease dancer threatens the existing patriarchal social order through narrativizing his psychological processes. Eliciting strong resistance from family and friends as well as a murder threat, he ends the relationship and goes on a journey to understand his sexuality and come to terms with his prejudices about women. Meeting another woman on the train is a herald of hope that he has found his true love, and although she rejects him, he gains an insight into the attitudes affecting his romantic relationship.

To justify its thematic and structural concerns, the exegesis situates my screenplay within a particular cultural milieu, post-Soviet Armenian academia, and contextualises it within Western and Armenian film traditions. The first three chapters are a discussion of influences on my writing, in particular similarities and differences between the screenplay and films about relationships with a double narrative flashback. Through a self-reflexive study of my writing process I examine how the screenplay converts a real-life event into fiction, placing it within the realist tradition. This includes theorizing that the screenplay breaks the conventions in the Armenian national cinema by challenging expressions of sexuality in relation to class and gender-bias in the context of cultural-political transformations in post-Soviet Armenia. Finally, I argue that the narrator-protagonist participates in narrating the story through verbal narration that is aimed at expressing the protagonist's conflicted psychological processes, and problematises the screenplay's point of view.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Introduction

The following exegesis consisting of six chapters is complementary to my practice-led PhD dissertation. The primary component of my dissertation is a screenplay for a feature drama film titled *The Station of Fossil Man*. Here, I discuss a number of theoretical issues and aspects concerning my screenplay. The first three chapters survey the screenplay through the prism of cultural contexts and examine it from thematic and narrative perspectives. The other three chapters investigate my writing process. I start with theorizing about the place my screenplay occupies among romantic drama films made in the Western tradition, which ties in with the following chapter where I study the influences of American literature on the screenplay. Then, I contrast the screenplay with Armenian traditional cinema that was subject to state censorship in the Soviet period and staunch conservatism after the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991. Next, transitioning to my writing process, I make a case for my writing style within the realist tradition, focusing on two issues: first, the realism of the screenplay and second, the nature of the protagonist as a narrator. In the final chapter, I analyse the narrative agency in the screenplay.

In the first chapter, ‘Narrative structure and themes: the screenplay *The Station of Fossil Man* and romantic drama films,’ the discussion focuses on common features in the narrative structure and themes that my work shares with romantic dramas made in the Western cinema. My objective is to understand the relationship between the screenplay and classical Hollywood style. I find a number of similarities in the areas of narrative structure – double narrative flashback and voice over – and themes – sex, love, and marriage and I argue that the screenplay can be considered a hybrid of ‘thwarted dream’ and ‘case history’ in Linda Aronson’s (2010) terms. In terms of the thematic threads, my screenplay is primarily about pre-marital relationships and can be placed in a group with films that depict complicated relationships that either lead to marriage or end indefinitely.

The second chapter, ‘Literary influences,’ indirectly ties in with the first through a discussion of American novels that inspired the screenplay *The Station of Fossil Man*. I discuss how my previous career and professional interest in American literature of the twentieth century had an impact on building the characters, depiction of society, and dramatization of its social and sexual mores. The representation of sexual taboo on

premarital sex, gender conventions and stereotypes, social discrimination based on class and academic background in the post-Soviet Armenian society is compared with the reflection of the same issues in American literature of the beginning of the twentieth century.

‘Armenian cinema,’ the third chapter, again deals with my position as a screenwriter, this time within the tradition of the Armenian national cinema. I analyse the role the screenplay plays among Soviet Armenian films, in general, and, in particular, in relation to Soviet Armenian romantic dramas. My screenplay is innovative in that it reflects on sexuality and premarital courtship in a manner that breaks the conventions of the Armenian cinema. I discuss a list of Soviet Armenian romantic dramas and contrast these with *The Station of Fossil Man* with regard to the films’ limited expression of sexuality and cursory dramatization of the characters’ sexual psychology, aspects that are central in my screenplay. I argue that the Soviet censorship and the existing rigorous conservatism have crippled the exploration of the romance genre and love story subgenre in the Armenian national cinema.

The next chapter, ‘Authentic realism,’ transitions to an analysis of the writing process of *The Station of Fossil Man* where I examine my role as a screenwriter within the tradition of realism. I argue that I am a realist writer by virtue of my intentions to depict the actual and factual and in creating the protagonist’s character based on a real-life figure. Building on claims that I use an insider’s view – immediate knowledge – of the cultural and social context in post-Soviet Armenia, I define my writing style as ‘authentic realism.’ Emphasizing references to reality as a characteristic feature of my writing style in the screenplay helps the reader to recognize the characters’ specific cultural context. I conclude the chapter by offering insights into the ontological nature of the screenplay’s story world, its shifting shape, which depends on the writer’s (my) interaction with the real world.

Chapter five, titled ‘The processing of the real into fiction via narrative transmission in the screenplay *The Station of Fossil Man*,’ advances the self-reflexive study of my writing process, carrying the investigation into a binary between reality and fiction. Tracing the origin of my screenplay to the real-life figure, I analyse the process of converting reality into fiction by using the concept of ‘aspects and layers’ of reality. In creating the protagonist, I argue that only ‘bits’ of reality may be articulated and depicted in a screenplay, not the whole character’s reality, and that the ‘aspects and layers’ of reality I

have used in my screenplay are based either on real facts, or on fabricated facts and assumptions. My analysis of these fabricated facts and assumptions shows that both are sourced from real facts, which I use to corroborate my central argument that the screenplay is in the tradition of realist narrative.

The final chapter, 'The narrative agency in the screenplay *The Station of Fossil Man*,' delves into the story mechanism of the screenplay theorizing that an implicit narrator (narrator-guide) is distinct from a verbal narrator and that both the verbal narrator and the narrator-guide are unreliable. I identify the narration in my screenplay as split between supranarrative and subnarrative agencies, claiming that the protagonist, as a narrator-guide, participates in the visual narration of the story. Further, the dual nature of the narrator as a verbal narrator and a narrator-guide theoretically mandates two narratees, one intradiegetic, the other extradiegetic (the audience). I survey the possible theoretical reasons for the existence of extradiegetic narratee, which is relevant as the screenplay narrative highlights a contrast between visual and verbal narration. Further, my discussion reveals differences between the visual and verbal narration, explaining my choice of using both because of the complexity of the protagonist's situation. The dual narrative mode aids in conveying the subtleties of the protagonist's psychological condition and the moral ambiguities surrounding his emotional infidelity. The ambiguities translate into the protagonist's own ambivalence towards his desires and the socially imposed conventions, which he talks about when narrating his past story to the intradiegetic narratee. Hence the unreliability of the protagonist as a narrator, with which I conclude the chapter.

My dissertation is primarily a creative practice, but its creative component works with the exegesis in a close dialogical relation. While the exegesis complements the screenplay through my studying of the thematic and stylistic preferences and theoretical approaches in writing the screenplay, it is the screenplay that leads the theoretical study. The creative practice also provides a framework that allows me to propose concepts and theories, while the exegesis allows me to make sense of the screenplay from a variety of perspectives – cinematic traditions, narrative structure, themes and genres. Comprising a screenplay and a series of academic articles, my dissertation is a kind of work where art and science inform each other in a process of raising questions and answering them.

Chapter I

Narrative structure and themes: the screenplay *The Station of Fossil Man* and romantic drama films

FILMS THAT INSPIRED ME

When writing *The Station of Fossil Man* I was influenced by other films. Three of them that I remember vividly are *Tegeran 43 (Tehran 43)* (Alov, Naumov, 1979), *The Hours* (Heisserer, 2002) and *Evening* (Koltaj, 2007). I was impressed by the use of alternating past and present narrative lines in these films, the theme of humans' inability to delete the past from their memories, and the theme of the past determining the present. While *The Hours* and *Evening* had a direct influence on my decision to link the past and the present narrative lines through similar themes and motifs, *Tegeran 43 (Tehran 43)* inspired me to write a love story.

The Station of Fossil Man is about a man, Haik, who loves a woman, Monica, but struggles to make a decision about marrying her because his community demands he choose a woman who has the same academic and social background as he. Eventually, Haik leaves Monica, though later he realizes his mistake. When creating Haik's character, I wanted to focus narrowly on that phase of a man's life when he chooses a spouse, which in Armenia is dictated by traditional views. In Armenian society, the pressure on one's choosing 'the right' spouse is high, and I wanted to dramatize what happens in the mind of a middle aged man who is torn between his desire to live with a particular woman and the pressure from the society to marry a woman not of his choosing. Showing how a university lecturer's dating a striptease dancer and his thinking about marrying her disturb the conservative community is the central conflict in my screenplay.

Looking back it was the theme of lost love in *Tegeran 43 (Tehran 43)* that captivated me, where the romance between Andrei and Marie becomes cruelly interrupted by the events of the war. The strong feeling between the characters is still the same years afterwards, when they meet again and their possible reunion looms. But Marie's assassination puts an end to a love that had struggled through decades. The protagonist in my screenplay, Haik, fails to commit himself either to Monica, to whom he is sexually attracted or Mary, his community's approved partner. Though Haik wants to live with

Monica, he cannot ignore the existing social-sexual mores, nor can he dismiss his class prejudices, given the persistent conformist pressure on him. Perhaps I also liked the platonic aspect of the romance in *Tegeran 43* (*Tehran 43*), which blooms under very unfavourable circumstances of espionage, bombing, gunfire and constant search for refuge. Similarly, Haik's love affair with Monica is restricted to his apartment, though it is far from being platonic. The theme song in *Tegeran 43* (*Tehran 43*), 'Une vie d'amour' ('A Life of Love') (Aznavour and Garvarentz 1981) enriches the one-time true love between Andrei and Marie. The theme of everlasting love that remains in the heart of the man who outlives his loved one inspired me in creating Haik's character who loses his own dream of love.

In *The Hours* the linking of the past and the present stories gave me the idea for Haik's story. I was fascinated by the narrative's moving back and forth in time and the representation of possible influences of one person's actions on others across a period of a century. The women's love lives in the film have a common development scheme, which turns out to be equally crucial in all three of their lives. Clarissa is openly homosexual in the present, but she also has a daughter. Virginia and Laura, in separate time frames, discover that they also are sexually attracted to women. Inspired by the transtemporal connection between the characters, I decided to highlight the similarities in the patterns that shape Haik's relationships with Monica, Mary and Rita. The pattern that is repeated in each of Haik's three affairs consists of the following phases: first, infatuation at first sight (he has raw sex with Monica, he is thrilled by Mary's intelligence and passes furtive glances at Rita); second, the passion cools and he chooses to cling to her (he moves in with Monica, he invites Mary to a wedding and he decides to tell Rita his story); third, the excitement from sex and love recedes, and a certain detachment sets in (he is unable to connect with Monica and Mary and discovers Rita is not in love with him); and fourth, jealousy indicates that he is in love (he gets back together with Monica and forbids Rita to go on a date).

The film *Evening* inspired me to develop the conceptual platform of Haik's story of his failure to marry a woman he had once so passionately loved. In *Evening*, Ann has a one-night passionate love affair with Harris, and though afterwards they drift apart, she remembers her feeling for Harris into old age; she married the wrong men, Ann says on her death bed. Her friend Lyla reassures her that she has succeeded, even though she lost Harris. The film implies that love and marriage do not necessarily happen together, an idea that I explore through Haik's investigation in the present storyline. In *Evening*, Ann regrets that

she and Harris did not pursue marriage. Like Ann, Haik is afraid of a future that he sees as unavoidable, where his marriage is convenient, but passionless.

Aside from these films there are structural and thematic similarities between other films and my work. While the films I discuss in the following did not affect my screenplay directly, it is important and useful to discuss the similarities and differences with the purpose of identifying the place my screenplay occupies among the films specifically structured on double narrative flashback and those that have the themes of sex, love and marriage. My analysis reveals how I explore the existing narrative strategies and themes and suggests that certain aspects of the narrative and the thematic configurations may be considered innovative.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Double narrative flashback

A double narrative flashback, *The Station of Fossil Man* is a hybrid of ‘thwarted dream’ and ‘case history,’ to use Linda Aronson’s terms (2010: 313). Aronson defines films as ‘thwarted dream,’ where the protagonist has lost their dream in the past, and they try to retrieve it in the present. She calls films ‘case history,’ in which a mysterious outsider’s life is investigated to discover the mystery that surrounds them (Aronson 2010: 278). The present narrative line in my screenplay starts with Haik’s travelling on a train after he has lost the two women he loved and had considered marrying. During his travels, Haik conducts an unofficial investigation of universal human sexuality, in the hope of understanding the connection between sexual desire and romantic love. On the train, he meets Rita and as he falls in love with her, she reminds him of his lost love. As Haik remembers his past, the narrative switches back to what happened to him in Yerevan, Armenia.

The bookending operates with the common patterns (i.e. initial attraction, friendship) in Haik’s relationships with Monica and Mary in the past and with Rita in the present. The past story that is presented in flashbacks is either Haik’s recollection or his verbal narration to Rita. In most instances, the narration mode is signposted, but occasionally it is unclear if the flashback is Haik’s actual memory or if it is his memory as narrated to Rita. The ending, where he rejects his dream of marrying Rita, suggests that Haik may be in a situation in