

Setting the Tone: In Lieu of an Exhibition Review

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In June 2023, Foam (Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam) mounted the exhibition *A Play of Light and Shadow*¹ with works by the renowned Turkish-Armenian photographer Ara Güler (1928-2018) in close collaboration between Foam, co-curator Mehmet Polat (Studio Polat), and the Ara Güler Museum in Istanbul. As a photojournalist, Güler's work has circulated in countless international newspapers, photo books, and exhibitions. His legacy, with work collected in prominent institutions worldwide, is being meticulously presented, preserved, and conserved by the Ara Güler Museum and the Ara Güler Archives and Research Center.



Fig. 1 (above): Foam gallery view: Ara Güler pictured with father Dacat Bey in their family's hometown of Şebinkarahisar, 1968. (Photo by Tina Bastajian, 2023)



Fig. 2 (left): Two screen stills from *Once Upon a Time in Istanbul*, directed by Samuel Aubin (Rhizome, Periferi Film, 2017).

Ara Güler was born Mıgırdıç Ara Derderyan in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district just five years after the forming of the Turkish Republic (1923). This district was also known as Pera during the late Ottoman period and for its vibrant multi-ethnic community in Constantinople that included Turks, Armenians, Jews, and Greeks. Educated in Armenian secondary schools, it was during his high school years that Güler became involved with theater and film productions, and then joining as a photojournalist for the newspaper *Yeni İstanbul*, and later with the daily paper *Hürriyet*.

Güler would ultimately gravitate towards the photographic medium yet keeping his affinity to the cinematic, which is evident through his use of mise en scene and dramaturgy of facial and gestural expressions and urban atmospheres that instill both filmic narratives and documentary traces through a palette of monochromatic densities. If you have ever seen luscious black and white photographs depicting the weathered faces of Armenian fishermen from Istanbul's Kumkapı neighborhood (circa 1950's), or a starkly lit backstreet in Galatasaray, it was presumably a photo taken by Ara Güler. During his lifetime, he photographed conflict zones from Eritrea to Sudan and composed portraits of the famous, from Maria Callas to James Baldwin. Güler gained notoriety as many of his images and interviews were included in prominent publications (*Paris Match*, *TIME*, *Newsweek*, etc.) as well as signing on with photographic agencies throughout Europe, and beyond, such as Magnum Photos after meeting French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson. In 1962 Güler was awarded the title of

'Master of Leica' and subsequently in 2016 he received the Leica Hall of Fame award.

I leave the exhibition at Foam overwhelmed by the amazing range of Güler's work in form, content, and context, and at the same time, bewildered with certain curatorial decisions that informed the overall framing. These include carefully muted phrasings that avoid pertinent and relevant contextual information that would not only inform attendees of historical, political, and personal details and how they overlap, but would also render and situate Güler's biography in relation to his work, and how this reverberates in present-day Turkey and within her many active diaspora(s). This is present in the exhibit's paratextual elements that include extended wall texts, labels, and parts of the exhibition catalog. I am not so sure a viewer largely unfamiliar with Güler's work would pick up the meager contextual breadcrumbs scattered around the exhibit that suggest Güler's Armenian heritage and its connection to the historical and political realities of a man who witnessed countless pivotal stages of the Turkish Republic, hence his moniker, 'the Eye of Istanbul.'

The Foam exhibition dances around historical specificities, most evident in the omissions in the wall texts, which also reappear within the publication. The euphemistic phrase "the events of 1915" is used to refer to the Armenian genocide, eliding an opportunity to give historical context. Additionally, the phrase *the events of 6/7 September 1955* is used to describe the Istanbul pogroms (also referred to as riots) targeted primarily against the Greek minority in Istanbul's Pera district – including churches, businesses, private properties, etc. – but which also extended to Jews and Armenians. However, much

more space is given to the political context, which passionately captures the mayhem in Pera and conjures narratives of pillage and looting from the Armenian genocide (1915-1923). Thus, thinking through the lens of historicity, might the ways in which Güler, his family, community, and culture are positioned as minorities within Turkish society deepen our understanding of his work? As scholar Talin Suciyan lucidly states, "Armenians in Turkey were pushed to the edge, as they did not have any means to struggle for Genocide recognition and were constantly terrorized and criminalized for being Armenian. Hence, the more violent state denial became, the more the Armenian community squeezed into Istanbul was forcibly co-opted into this denial in order to survive."²

This short text is unlikely to fill in all the contextual and biographical details attributed to Güler's witnessing eye that spanned decades. Indeed, his was a rich life, one in which he was simultaneously witnessing the ghosts of his Armenian heritage whilst thoroughly embracing his Turkishness. The exhibition and its blind spots led me to contemplate my own family's history and how coping strategies around state-sponsored denialism have played out across continents, generations, and contexts. I enter a small space adjacent to the gallery and watch the entire one hour documentary on Güler by French filmmaker Samuel Aubin. Towards the end of the film, I take note (and a few photos) of two film stills that are subtitled. This encounter with Güler forms part of oral history that adds missing and crucial biographical and historical context lacking in both the exhibition and catalog. These two film stills speak volumes especially in juxtaposition with the gallery image of Güler and his father in their family's village

of Şebinkarahisar to which such vital details are missing on the wall label (Fig 1). Here I am reminded of the quote by cultural theorist Fred Moten: "I feel anything that I have to say, that's because a whole bunch of people, a whole bunch of history, a whole bunch of things sent me to say it."³

I began this essay with a short description of Güler that qualified his Turkish nationality by hyphenating it to include his Armenian heritage. Said naming, however, did not make it into the paratextual elements in *A Play of Light and Shadow*. The ascription of a hyphenated Turkish-Armenian label to Güler is by no means an anomaly. In fact, many artist bios, including those that figure prominently from non-Armenian and non-Western sources, have also readily hyphenated Güler's identity.

While the Foam exhibit lists the Güler family's original Armenian surname (Derderyan), albeit in the last sections of the exhibit, it conveniently brushes over the Turkification of surnames. The Surname Law (*Soyadı Kanunu*), instituted in 1934, was one of the last reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's modernization process during the transition from the Ottoman period.⁴ While not obligatory for non-Muslims, for Armenians, this meant coming to terms with a 'semiotic burden'⁵ by erasing the -ian/yan (family of) at the end of their names, or by changing their names entirely to not call attention to their ethnic and religious identity. Tangible remnants of the Surname Law still resonate in contemporary Turkish society, continually flattening history through the impediment of identity formation, yielding a constant struggle for equality for long standing ethnic, religious, and linguistic 'minorities' currently living in Turkey (Kurds, Alevi, Armenians, Yazidis, Syrians, Assyrians, Jews, Greeks,



Fig. 3 (left): Ara Güler in 2018. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Necromancer569, reprinted under Creative Commons license)

Fig. 4 (below): Ara Güler's exhibition at National Gallery of Armenia. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Armineaghayan, reprinted under Creative Commons license)



Circassians, Roma, etc.).⁶ The repercussions of the Surname Law produce othering mechanisms that are still prevalent in contemporary Turkish society, which echo the survival strategies of co-opting state-sponsored denial described in the passage by Suciyan.⁷

Understandably, the Foam exhibition on Güler (or any other exhibition on his oeuvre) is not meant to be a history lesson. Admittedly, from what I have read about and also understood from Ara Güler's video interviews, I suspect he would have vehemently resisted such framings. However, there is much at stake in terms of the politics of naming, and in the implications of linguistic markers bearing various aspects of familial belonging and ethnicity. The outdated laconic and hence censored descriptions of historical events turn a blind eye to similar silencing strategies in present-day Turkey. Such camouflaged omissions and resistance to connecting some basic dots in the Güler exhibit send a precarious message to museum visitors, especially for an exhibition taking place in The Netherlands. Given the recent

(and long overdue) debates – and artistic and curatorial interventions – on decolonizing museums, such slippages of information are antithetical to resetting and repairing past and ongoing historical erasures of 'granular and textured histories'⁸ in Dutch and international institutions.

Güler's famous moniker, 'the Eye of Istanbul,' got me thinking about the range of his delicate gazes cast on his beloved Istanbul and her denizens. Could his mastery to capture the fine gradations between light and shadow, stasis, movement, and gesture afford a certain perspectival latitude, which is influenced by both the complexity and nuances of this suppressed, cloaked, and erased history? How might curatorial frameworks, wall labels, and exhibition texts be revisited with this in mind? I take note of my strong hunch but am unable to fully understand and express the layers of history, identity, and experience behind Güler's lens.

I was able to catch the Foam exhibition one more time a few days before its closing. By kismet, an article by Turkish-Armenian journalist Rober Koptaş appeared in the online news platform CivilNet around that

time. In it, Koptaş writes, "Could Ara Güler's Armenian heritage have played a role in his transformation into a 'photo eye' that seemingly followed, scanned, observed, and recorded Turkey like Vertov's 'camera eye'? Could it be related to his coming from a community that had been pushed outside of life and forced to cling to the land it lived on, paying the price through being silenced and suppressed? Perhaps, as a reaction to being pushed to the margins and forced to live within the boundaries of his own small community, Ara Güler became a constantly observing eye. An eye that was both from the outside, more than a Turk could ever be, and from the inside, more than a foreigner could ever be. Maybe being an Armenian, living within the Turkish and Muslim majority, was one of the fundamental secrets of his magnificent shots."⁹

Such questions call for a deepening of (or a reckoning with) Güler's aesthetic, personal, and photojournalistic lens. I revisit the interview with the co-curators, which hints at this unique perspective. Foam curator Claartje van Dijk notes, "Our aim is to visualize different voices about Turkish

identity." This is followed by *A Play of Light and Shadow* curator Mehmet Polat: "Thus, to understand modern-day Turkey better, we must examine its past. Güler's work provides a unique perspective into Turkey's history, allowing us to witness how he documented historical events and faced the difficult parts of the country's history head-on."¹⁰ Given that the Netherlands has a large population of diasporans from West Asia that include Turkish nationals from different ethnic backgrounds, religions, and political affinities, these *difficult pasts outlive Güler as they also fold into the present* in terms of what is overshadowed in the narratives provided. What messages do these suppressed narratives send to visitors who yearn to find themselves somehow reflected, acknowledged? Or, for that matter, to enlighten tourists and the Dutch public at large?

This tonal essay scratches the surface of some of the oversights presented in the Foam exhibition and catalog. Much can be said for the richness of the catalog's essays and layout, the expansive exhibition design, and the care of presenting a fraction of Güler's extensive oeuvre. And, of course, the works on display are magnificent. Hopefully in the near future greater attention will be paid to the above-mentioned overshadowing of crucial and specific historical elements so that such semiotic and related burdens become precious and indelible maps to navigate anew.¹¹

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Notes

- <https://www.foam.org/events/ara-guler>
- Suciyan, Talin. "The Armenians in Turkey: From Autochthonous People to Diaspora," in *The Armenian Diaspora and Stateless Power Collective Identity in the Transnational 20th Century*, eds. T. Chahinian, S. Kasbarian, T. Nalbantian. (London, Bloomsbury, 2023) 17.
- See: <https://lithub.com/an-interview-with-fred-moten-pt-i/>
- Thanks to the Wayback Machine's capture of a copy of the reform document before this Turkish government page was removed. See: https://web.archive.org/web/20230101000000*/http://www.nvi.gov.tr/Files/File/Mevzuat/Nufus_Mevzuati/Kanun/pdf/soyadi_kanunu.pdf
- Türköz, Meltem, "The Burden of Minority Names," in *Naming and Nation-building in Turkey*, ed. Meltem Türköz, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 143-162.
- This does not include the more recent influx of migrant and refugee communities from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Cameroon, Congo, etc. Not to mention Turkey's deplorable record of censorship and human rights abuses toward their LGBTQIA+ community.
- This overview, "Turkey: Article 301: How the law on "denigrating Turkishness" by Amnesty International while dated from 2006, outlines many cases and ramifications of Turkish Penal Code - Article 301 for 'insulting Turkishness' which still has repercussions in the present. See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/003/2006/en/>
- Isha Iyer, "A Pedagogy of Reparations: Notes toward Repairing the Film and Media Studies Curriculum." *Feminist Media Histories*, no 8.1 (2022) 181-193.
- <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/756094/letter-from-istanbul-the-irony-of-the-armenian-photographer/>
- Claartje van Dijk, and Mehmet Polat. "An Icon from Turkey: Unraveling Layers in Ara Güler's Photography." in *Ara Güler – A Play of Light and Shadow*, ed. van Dijk and Polat, (Antwerp: Hannibal Books, 2023), 15.
- Many thanks to Francisca Khamis Giacomani for reminding me of the Fred Moten quote, and to Heleen Mineur for touching up my poor gallery photo taken with my phone. Also, I am very thankful to filmmaker Samuel Aubin for allowing me to use direct screen stills from his documentary. And lastly, I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to writer and literary organizer Nancy Agabian for the careful reading of an early version of my text, and for her on-point suggestions.