

## **The Promise (2016) George**

P Michell, 2019

**Starring:** [Charlotte Lebon](#), [Christian Bale](#), [Oscar Isaac](#)

**Summary:** It is 1914. As the Great War looms, the mighty Ottoman Empire is crumbling. Constantinople, the once vibrant, multicultural capital on the shores of the Bosphorus, is about to be consumed by chaos. Michael Boghosian (Oscar Isaac), arrives in the cosmopolitan hub as a medical student determined to bring modern medicine back to Siroun, his ancestral village in Southern Turkey where Turkish Muslims and Armenian Christians have lived side by side for centuries. Photo-journalist Chris Myers (Christian Bale), has come here only partly to cover geo-politics. He is mesmerized by his love for Ana (Charlotte le Bon), an Armenian artist he has accompanied from Paris after the sudden death of her father. As the Turks form an alliance with Germany and the Empire turns violently against its own ethnic minorities, their conflicting passions must be deferred while they join forces to survive even as events threaten to overwhelm them.

This film gives a small glimpse into the Armenian Genocide.

**Discussion?** Purpose of film – business, entertainment, information / journalism, propaganda, art ...

The word genocide (by Lemmkin) though first used in 1944 was inspired by what happened to the Armenian community. In a 1949 interview, Raphael Lemkin (*Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*) said "I became interested in genocide because it happened so many times. It happened to the Armenians, then after the Armenians, Hitler took action."

An unusual, but important film to show at U3A Cinema. Probably not the greatest film / commercial success. Yet is a good example of how cinema can be relevant. Serves to remind us despite adversities Armenians have made their mark in the world. (Not unlike the Jews.)

Their legacy includes: Charles Aznavour, Cher, Kardashians (for better or worse), Rouben Mamoulian (film director), George Donikian (SBS), Eric Bogosian, Akim Tamiroff, Howard Kazanjian (Hollywood Executive producer and close friend of George Lucas from their USC days, – Star Wars, Raiders and many more. Non fiction books on the Western. Described as one of the twelve most powerful Christians in Hollywood.). In addition many, many musicians.

### **Director Terry George, Irish**

Was interned at the notorious Long Kesh Prison as a suspected republican in Northern Ireland in the 1970s.

Quotes on making the film:

I've learned from films like [In the Name of the Father](#) (1993) and [Hotel Rwanda](#) (2004) that everything you put on screen has to be fastidiously researched. Even the fictional

scenes that are woven throughout the real events and the real people you're portraying can't just be made up. They have to reflect something real that was going on at that time and place. The look, the feel, it all has to be real, and of course the actual names and dates do as well. It's important to be as accurate as you can, even with the fictional scenes embedded within your reality. So I would build up a dossier and work from that. (...) Well, there's a library of revisionist and denialist material out there about the Armenian Genocide - you know, that it should be thought of not as a genocide but as a civil war. The other side is that this was designed, that it was planned. And as someone who studied these events, it's important to understand the political motivations of both sides so that we can have a discussion, but it's absolutely not a question of did it happen -- because it did - but why did it happen. That's the question you need to get to. [2016]

We re-created historical events and had the [fictional] characters walk through those events. Remember, the Armenian Genocide was well publicized at the time in the United States - especially by The New York Times, which had stories about it almost every day, and other reporters, Christian missionaries ... all who sent reports about the various massacres, so we had plenty of documented information. [2017]

Very few people will make films like this or get the opportunity to do so. Hollywood doesn't make films like this any more. It makes \$200 million films about cars chasing submarines across the ice. So to get the chance to create characters that will take audiences inside a complex situation is a gift. Do research on almost any historical event or war and you're going to run into difficult material. Pretty horrible stuff. But I still jumped at the opportunity. [2017]

### **Trivia:**

According to director and co-writer [Terry George](#) he introduced the fictitious character of American journalist Chris Meyers ([Christian Bale](#)) to the screenplay of [The Promise](#) (2016), because by doing so he could highlight the importance of independent reporting during wartime. He could show what information was being sent across the world around this period of time. The presence of Chris Meyers also allowed for the introduction of real historical figures to the story, such as [Henry Morgenthau](#), who was the American Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and published memoirs about his experiences. While there was no American journalist named Chris Myers during the Armenian Genocide, his character and reporting is inspired by [Armin T. Wegner](#), Johannes Lepsius and many other historical witnesses.

This feature film was fully financed by billionaire [Kirk Kerkorian](#), who was of Armenian extraction and whose family had lived through these events. When he owned MGM in the early 1980s, he couldn't even persuade his own studio chief, Frank Yablans, to greenlight this picture in part because of Turkey's pressure on U.S., which has military bases in Turkey. Because political tension dated back to the early 20th century and one of the roles was originally intended for [Clark Gable](#).

The scene between US Ambassador [Henry Morgenthau](#) and Turkish Interior Minister Talaat Pasha is taken entirely from Ambassador Morgenthau's memoirs. When Talaat seeks the insurance money for the Armenians he had ordered killed, it is almost verbatim. The memoirs read: "I wish," Talaat now said, "that you would get the American life insurance companies to send us a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. They are practically all dead now and have left no heirs to collect the money. It of course all escheats to the State. The Government is the beneficiary now. Will you do so?" [Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, New York: Doubleday, 1918, page 339]

[Sylvester Stallone](#) wrote on Facebook: "This extraordinary film is opening April 21... It is a subject that I have been fascinated with for decades and it has taken many years for it to finally have the guts to make it and finally bring it to the screen all to see... It is true and an incredibly important historical drama that has all the extraordinary ingredients that can make a movie Oscar quality. Its amazing lead actors Christian Bale, and Oscar Isaac, play their parts to perfection! And a special shout out to its legendary producer, [Mike Medavoy](#), who finally brought this epic story to the screen. Also, I owe Mike Medavoy A great deal because he's the one who gave [Rocky](#) (1976) the greenlight, and that's why am here today. This film has it all...!!! I'm jealous." [April 1, 2017]

Nil Promise Connection but useless Fun! For Star Wars: Return of the *Jedi* (1983), *Armenian producer Kazanjian*, came up with the idea of shooting the production under a fake name, *Blue Harvest*, in order to forestall any attempts at [price gouging](#) by suppliers. *Blue Harvest* was purported to be a [horror film](#) with the tag line "horror beyond imagination". Hats and T-shirts were printed up for the crew to wear and to further add to the authenticity of the ruse.

Reviews:

### ***The Promise* Finds a Simpleminded Melodrama Inside the Armenian Genocide**

*By David Edelstein (vulture.com 2017)*

It's easy to blow raspberries at the epic *The Promise*, in which Oscar Isaac and Christian Bale compete for the same woman against a backdrop of the Armenian genocide. But only a handful of narrative films have even touched on the Turkish-led massacre of a million and a half Armenians in the early 20th century (which Turkey still officially denies), so *The Promise* deserves at least a fair synopsis.

Oscar Isaac plays an Armenian apothecary named Mikael Boghosian, who leaves his small southern Turkish town in 1914 for medical school in Constantinople, using his future wife's dowry to finance his education. The young innocent is dazzled by the big city — and also by his nieces' willowy dance teacher, Ana (Charlotte Le Bon), who's the girlfriend of "famous American journalist" Chris Myers (Christian Bale). For a while, Armenians and Turks sit side by side in apparent harmony. (You can recognize the Turks because they're darker and wear fezzes.) But there are ominous signs.

Mikael's medical-school pal, Emre (Marwan Kenzari), invites him to a party at the mansion of Emre's father, an openly bigoted government official, where the Turks consort merrily with German soldiers. (The Germans launch into a chorus of "Deutschland Über Alles," which they do with little provocation in movies like this.) Then war breaks out and the Turks begin rounding up Armenian "spies" and "traitors" — and, pretty soon, women and children who need to be marched into the desert and slaughtered for their own protection.

Assaulted when he tries to rescue Armenian shopkeepers, Mikael is tended to by Ana, who goes on to make love to him, unaware that he is betrothed. (Mikael starts to say something but it has gone too far and he presumably needs his tongue for other purposes.) She is about to tell Chris that she loves Mikael — but then Mikael, attempting to use his fiancée's dowry to free his imprisoned uncle, gets smashed on the head and shipped to a work camp, where, six months later, a former Armenian clown blows himself up along with a sadistic Turkish officer (a good sight gag) and Mikael escapes to his hometown, where his honest mother (Shohreh Aghdashloo) forces him to honor his promise to marry Maral (Angela Sarafyan) and the couple slips off to a remote farm to have babies.

The idyll lasts until Mikael hears that Ana and Chris are nearby helping thousands of Armenian orphans escape to the safe haven that is Aleppo, Syria. (The irony here might well have been intended.) The tension between Mikael and Chris is thick, but they table their differences as the Turks move in and the bloodshed begins. There are convolutions ahead — massacres, diplomatic interventions, executions — before the threesome end up in the famous battle at Musa Dagh, a Turkish mountain where Armenian resisters and their families mount a violent defense as the cavalry (a French ship captained by Jean Reno) chugs towards the coast.

It's worth asking why so many movies with disasters — natural or man-made — have love triangles at the center. My guess is that filmmakers feel they need to ground so inconceivable a horror in something that audiences can *relate* to. At least director Terry George and his co-writer, Robin Swicord, are several cuts above the Roland Emmerich template, where hundreds of millions perish while Jake Gyllenhaal tries to summon the words to tell Emmy Rossum that he, you know, likes her. For one thing, Mikael, Ana, and Chris keep their focus on saving orphans, their longings and jealousies expressed in stray love-gazes and bitchy asides. For the viewer, though, attention is divided between praying that the Armenian people will not be exterminated and wondering which man — both admirable — Ana will choose. I guessed (and wrote in my notebook) exactly how the love story would be resolved a half-hour before the climax, a feat that fills me with both pride and disappointment. The chief flaw of *The Promise* is that there isn't a single development that you can't see limping toward you from a great distance.

Another problem is that Oscar Isaac's character is so insipid. The actor has made a specialty of transforming himself for every role, changing his look, his rhythms, perhaps his very essence. But he's a little old and much too bright to play so callowly starry-eyed. Bale does better as the prickly crusading journalist, but you can sense that this is akin to pro bono work — it's for a good cause. Le Bon is, as her name would suggest, delectable,

but her achievement is mainly not provoking unintentional laughs.

Finally, no attempt is made to illuminate the peculiar reasons that the Turks used to justify the wanton killing, among them the misguided conviction that the Armenians would throw in their lot with the Russians and/or other enemies of the German-Turkish alliance. Apart from that chorus of “Deutschland Über Alles,” there’s no suggestion of the scale of the German atrocities — one way the Turks were able to proceed with their genocide unmolested.

Does *The Promise* work on its own simpleminded melodramatic terms? Yes, although for budgetary reasons (I assume) the weeks-long battle at Musa Dagh comes off as a skirmish over a couple of days.

But how much more confidently I could recommend it if George had told the story with some artistic cunning! For guidance, he could merely have looked to his own 2004 *Hotel Rwanda*, in which Don Cheadle played Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of a four-star, French-owned hotel who became a kind of Oskar Schindler of Rwanda. What’s fascinating is how Rusesabagina begins as a flatterer and briber of officers who come to ogle Western women — and how he ends up using those same talents to keep his family and hundreds of Tutsis taking refuge in his hotel from being dragged out and murdered. The film is no masterpiece — again, George can’t illuminate *why* a million people were murdered by their own countrymen. But as we focus on Rusesabagina’s almost farcically desperate attempts to forestall tragedy, we have a vision of genocide as a virus with its own terrible momentum. (Because I mentioned Oskar Schindler, I should note that Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* transcends melodrama by being the story not of victims and victimizers but of an ordinary man’s inability to do nothing in the face of evil. Much more fascinating!)

It should be noted that the late investor Kirk Kerkorian is credited as the executive producer of the film and was the driving force in its financing. In the late ’60s, he won a controlling interest in MGM for the purpose not of making movies but of stripping the studio of its real-estate assets and driving it into the ground. (He hired the odious James Aubrey to help.) Kerkorian was an architect of Las Vegas’s megacasino industry, and so MGM as we knew it became the MGM Grand Hotel. His efforts on behalf of his Armenian heritage are laudable, but his legacy to cinema is lamentable.

***Andrew Lowery, 2017 (empireonline.com)***

Generally, a film like *The Promise* wouldn’t have generated so much pre-release notoriety. But after just three screenings at the Toronto International Film Festival last year, it somehow amassed more than 50,000 one-star ratings on IMDb. Unless Canadian cinemas are considerably bigger than those in the UK, that’s an unlikely tally. And the smart money is on it being due to its subject matter — recognised as historical fact in the rest of the world, the Armenian genocide is a controversial topic in modern Turkey, even a century on from the atrocities. But, as seems to be the case with so many films that provoke such a reaction, it’s blander than the hubbub suggested.

It's difficult to escape the feeling we should be glad *The Promise* exists. On paper, *The Promise* has a lot going for it. Isaac and Bale are reliable, big things are expected of Le Bon, and director Terry George has form with solid issues dramas like *Some Mother's Son* and *Hotel Rwanda*. The whole production wasn't short of cash, too, with the late billionaire Kirk Kerkorian (an Armenian-American, and former owner of MGM) providing a hefty budget. He died just before production, but his cash is all on screen: whoever runs the extras agencies near the Spanish locations presumably had a lovely Christmas as a result.

That said, more work on the script wouldn't have gone amiss. The central love triangle is clearly meant to sugar the pill of the wider narrative of mass murder, but in trying to pay attention to both, the final product falls between two poles. The central trio get into their fractious holding pattern pretty early, and the rest of the film is them being separated and reunited in various combinations as the grim events of the genocide unfold around them. We stay on a very narrow range of characters, with little interest paid to the wider context around them; *Schindler's List's* wide-angle, almost sociological approach to such horrors remains the gold standard. Armenians had been subject to discrimination in Turkey for decades — focusing on a few relatively bourgeois victims almost downplays the horrors, which can't have been the goal.

There's also an almost total lack of irony, which can lead to a po-faced stuffiness but here works surprisingly well. And Isaac is chiefly responsible for this, turning in a sincere performance that sells the situation Mikael finds himself in. His flair for suffering (an under-discussed string in any actor's bow) sustains things through scenes which threaten to turn to cheese at any moment, and Isaac is far more complex and compromised than the stiff opening moments would initially suggest. He's a character, rather than a cypher, and it saves the film.

In the end, though, while *The Promise* lacks depth in both its strands, it tackles such an underexposed moment in human history, it's difficult to escape the feeling we should be glad it exists.

Undeniably effective, in its own blunt way, this deserves credit for shining light on a crime that's — unbelievably and controversially — still denied to this day.