Entanglements

*Sorry it’s much longer than expected, I got excited and hyper-focused!*

**Purpose and Target Audience**

This is a bird’s-eye-view of Lake Sevan. It is THE visual that comes to mind when one thinks of representing the lake. My comics will be about fishing at Lake Sevan, but it will NOT have this picture in it, and that is for two reasons.

1. This satellite view takes a distance from the daily, the local, the social, and emphasizes the phenomenal, national, ecological. Both because of the context it has been used in and because no one really sees Sevan this way.
2. I want the story of my comics to speak not only on behalf of fishers of Sevan, but fishers in other lakes and seas too, and anyone working with non-human nature with a direct relationship to it.

The target audience of my comics project then is the general public but will probably mostly consist of people with some relation to Armenia and people curious about ecological change or labor in a natural environment.

The purpose of my comics is to make the labor of fishers visible and put the humans ‘back’ in nature. It will show how social, political, economic, and ecological processes and relations cannot be separated from each other. The story will be one about fishers who navigate not just through the waves of the lake, but also through life burdened with obstacles related to a changing ecology, livelihood, sociality, security, and dignity.

The comics will show one fishing ride in Lake Sevan with an emphasis on entanglements. As the story progresses, we see:

* The fishing net becoming entangled with itself and with algae.
* The algae entangling the net, and the lives of the lake and of the fishers.
* The fishers getting entangled in the difficulties of securing their livelihood, fighting against non-human nature, being good fathers and neighbors, navigating through state bureaucracy and surveillance trying to protect their freedom.

Ultimately, the story is one about the entanglement of local lives with structural processes.

**Subject: Plot, Characters, Location and Time**

**Plot:** Brothers Hamlet and Husik, fishers at Lake Sevan, take off from the shore with their motorboat and ride toward their nets lying near the other side of the lake. As they move in the dark space crashing the waves in the early morning hours, they calculate how much fish they should catch that day to make enough money to buy the last essential ingredient for the *Gavar* *pakhlava (*a sophisticated pastry offered as part of dowry*)* of Hamlet’s daughter’s wedding.[[1]](#footnote-1) As they reach the net and start pulling it, the net, a character in the story, speaks about the material conditions of fishing – the harsh weather, the waves, the waste, the lack of fish, and the algae blocking its grid – by referring to its own experiences. In parallel, Hamlet and Husik count the caught fish as they remove them from the net. During the mechanical activity of pulling the net, their minds wander around various topics, from mundane errands to bigger worries in their off-water lives: their debt to the fish seller, their client, that they’re expected to pay in a month’s time; the funeral of a fellow villager they have to attend later in the day (where they’re supposed to donate money to participate in the expenses); … [I need to pick these cleverly to not make it all about finances, but also choose ones that do not need a long background explanation and can naturally emerge in the context of a fishing ride]. In the meantime, the net that they’re pulling starts becoming greener, covered with algae more and more, and the fish in it becomes less and less. Remember that the net is still telling its own witness-story. Eventually the two sub-stories get merged as the end of the net reaches the boat: the fishers count the last fish – 14 – ‘ehh, 1400 Drams [equivalent to 3.3 EUR], that barely covers the boat’s fuel cost’.

**Characters:**

Hamlet and Husik: I will not name any village in the comics, but in my mind I am taking Noratus as the reference of where the fishers are from. Each of the brothers has 3 children. They have been working together as fishers for 10 years. Before that, they were in Russia, working in seasonal construction jobs. They left that job and Russia because they were too dependent on their patron, and they didn’t see the point of living away from their family and hometown. Fishing keeps them close to home and gives them some independence. They like the fact that they don’t have to report to anyone and they don’t have fixed schedules. But they are exhausted by now, and do not enjoy the work however gorgeous the sunrises are from the middle of the lake. Hamlet is the older; his oldest daughter is 20 years old, at the marriage age. Husik’s eldest is his 18 year-old son who recently started his mandatory military service. [There is more and more that I can refer to while writing the script. I don’t know how much it makes sense to go on describing now].

The net: Fishers of Lake Sevan often refer to the net as evidence to their claims. The net gets frozen – it is *that* cold in winter. The net gets torn by the currents or stolen, they have to buy a new one – fishing is *not* a cheap investment. The net gets covered with algae, no fish gets caught into it – they *do* care about the ecological change, their job is the first one being affected. So the net is a witness to the harsh working conditions, the material costs of fishing, [I would add the immaterial too as for example its weight causes health issues (back and arms pain)], and the ecological change of the lake. In this story, we get to hear what this witness has to tell, the witness which is the only one ‘on board’ with the fishers, in the depths of the water, during hours of day when most others are sleeping.

**Location**: From the shore to the waters of Lake Sevan. I have in mind the shore of Noratus village, and the net located near Artanish village on the other side of the Lake. But these exact locations only matter for filling up the illustrations and conversations with actual spatial references. The story itself can take place anywhere in the lake.

**Time:** The algae bloom in the summer months. So the story needs to happen in summer. That means, the weather is not that cold and in this story the net is not frozen. It also means the fishing has to happen in the very early hours of the day, from around 2:00-3:00 am till sunrise. That is because the fish will rot in the heat of daylight. So most of the story happens in the dark. But since the amount of fish ‘swimming around’ is too little in the middle of the summer and too cheap because it rots quickly, not many fishers go fishing during that period. That’s why, for the story to be more representative, I will situate it in the end of summer, when there is still algae, and the other conditions are similar, but the fish caught is relatively more and is sold for a slightly higher price (100 Dram in average [25 cents], whereas in the middle of summer it usually costs 50 Dram [12 cents]).

**Visual Representation**

There are two ‘voices’ in the story, that of the fishers and that of the net. They will be represented in two different text colors. But also for the majority of the story (except the beginning and the end) the two voices will develop in parallel, divided horizontally on the page: the fishers on the boat will be the upper sub-story, the net will be the bottom sub-story. The comics will be in the format of a folding booklet (was it libretto?) to allow for the net to be represented longitudinally. As the pages progress the net will become greener – covered in algae – more entangled and torn. The first 1-2 pages will only show the fishers, riding off the shore, so in those pages the upper and bottom parts will not be divided, the pages will be in portrait mode. The same applies to the last page where the end of the net reaches the boat, so we see the net and the fishers in the same panel in portrait again. I am not sure of whether I want to include a metaphor in the last page and make the whole panel greenish and covered with algae, blurring the fishers too.

One last and important note is that the two sub-stories will also be visually connected to each other. The fishing net is pulled in a way that it comes on board of the boat from one side, and leaves the boat and enters into the water again from the other. So the net that we see in the bottom part is always connected to the net the fishers are pulling above, and the parts of the net we see on the left of the boat are the parts that have already passed through the boat, and the ones on the right are the ones yet to pass. The illustration should be drawn in a way to make possible this trick – seeing the net at the same time as one continuous longitudinally laid net, and one that is in movement being pulled and laid back again by the fishers. I’m not sure if I managed to explain it well in writing. I’ll try to show my idea in drawing tomorrow ☺

Last last note: in each part the panels seem a bit monotonous this way, especially in the part of the fishers. So maybe I can show the subject they’re talking about, like the fish seller, or something happening back at their houses, in round frames within the panels that show the fishing.

**Material needed**

The story is based on ethnographic data from my interviews and informal conversations with fishers, as well as fieldnotes, video footage and still photos from the few times I accompanied fishers in their fishing rides. [I can show you a couple of the videos that help with imagining the boat-fisher-net positioning]

I may use the photos as collage too.

Besides the collage and drawing, I might also use origami (paper boats) and rope/wool fiber (for the net and algae) by pasting them on the paper.

COMMENTS:

You have three clear characters: the brothers and the net but it is a bit unclear if the net is an omniscient neutral observer, if it is “with” the brothers or against them or simply use to tell the environmental part of the story. Is the NET a narrator?

The dialogue must be functional and realistic so you have to come up with a reason why suddenly the brothers are talking about all these different problems.

Maybe the wedding (with the gift, the economic part, the season question) can be more central as an imput for why the brothers are talking about all of this. Simply their mind wandering is a bit weak as a narrative device.

As you develop this subject you should really limit the focus of their own conversation as you think about what a realistic dialogue may be like between them.

We understand that your approach is not to express specific judgement on the fishing but rather to describe the live and the entanglements of this fishermen. However, even just for your development of the story, it would be useful to have a sense of what you want to SAY with this description. What is the story ABOUT?

Also as you develop the format and formal choices you should think more about your audience as this would determine if you go toward a physical object, a webcomic, or a piece of graphic journalism.

1. I’m not sure I want to keep the scenario this way. They could be talking about the cost of medicine, or even bread to make the message more straightforward. The daughter’s wedding dowry is a very realistic scenario because they would have gotten loans for medicine and bread much more easily, so they wouldn’t really count the money for that. But explaining the context of the dowry could take up space. So I need to think more about this. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)