

**THE UNIVERSITY OF READING**

**Cinema Regarding Nations**

**Re-imagining Armenian, Kurdish, and Palestinian national  
identity in film**

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### **Notes on transliteration**

In general, I have kept to the standards used by the majority of my sources for transliteration from Armenian, Kurdish, and Arabic into English. Armenian is complicated by the two different dialects and I have used the standard Eastern dialect which appears in most sources from Armenia (thus *Nahapet* rather than *Nahabet*). For Kurdish and Turkish words and proper names that appear in different forms in different texts, I have adopted the most common English form (thus Ahmed-i Khani rather than Ehmedê Khanî). Finally, for Arabic words and names I have used familiar English spelling where possible and omitted most diacritics for ease of readability.

Book and article titles, film titles, and personal names that begin a sentence are capitalised but not elsewhere if they are not in the original. In direct quotes, I have retained capitalisation and spelling used in the original sources. Film titles are given in the form most familiar to English speakers, irrespective of the language of the original version. For example, I have used *Yol* rather than *The Way*, and *Otobüs* rather than *The Bus*. However the Filmography includes the alternative/original title wherever possible.

# Chapter 1

## Cinema, State, and Nation

*Armenian flag*



*Kurdish flag*



*Palestinian flag*



Two of the most common images of a state are its flag and a map.<sup>1</sup> However, some national communities are not represented by symbols of the state or states in which they live and yet are unable to parade their own. The flags shown here, standing for three such communities, have at various times been deemed illegal: the Armenian flag in the Soviet Union; the Kurdish flag in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq; and the Palestinian flag in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.<sup>2</sup>

The continued existence of these peoples as separate collective entities has been, or remains, under threat. Their struggles for survival have been conducted by political means and violence but, crucially, also through cultural resistance. My interest is in the latter; particularly the role that film plays as a cultural artefact, articulating the identity of these communities through narrative and symbols, as well as its contribution to the discourse and practice of resistance. As we shall see, flags and the territory defined by the maps are a recurrent feature of this discourse.

The scope of my research is, first, to examine the ways that cinema represents the identity of stateless and marginalised peoples as “national” by exploring the themes, symbols, and formal structures of a diverse collection of film in three case studies. In so doing, I connect my analysis to current debates on the cinematic production of national identity. Secondly, I contextualise these expressions of identity by relating them to the social, political, and historical forces that have shaped the different communities. Thus, I engage with theoretical arguments on the processes behind the formation of nations and their survival without a state. Finally, I

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<sup>1</sup> I make this assertion not from a scientific survey but from an observation of the images returned by a search of the web using ‘country name’ as the search term for *Google Images* at <http://www.google.co.uk> in January 2007.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I follow the United Nations designation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank territories occupied by Israel since 1967 as “Occupied Palestinian Territory”.

position representations of “the nation” in a thematic framework that supports my analysis at a time of increasingly unstable notions of what constitutes the national. In this way I also firmly link my study to developments in national cinema scholarship.

## **The state, nation, and identity**

Many contemporary investigations into the representation of national identity commence with Benedict Anderson’s now commonplace idea of the nation as an ‘imagined political community’: a community fashioned by its dispersed members believing, by virtue of various means of communication, that they share an identity and a willingness to live together (1983:6). The *nation* that Anderson describes is the *community formed by the citizens of a state*, and the term national identity is used to express the condition of such a community *identifying with a state*. This formulation implicitly excludes the possibility of there being other groups of people that also would describe themselves as, or that could objectively be, described as, nations.<sup>3</sup> However, those such as the Armenians, Kurds, and Palestinians, have come to be recognised as nations though their members may be stateless, or inhabit multiple states, or be citizens of a state they do not readily acknowledge. In this thesis I make a distinction between the nation in the sense of a socially and culturally bounded people, and the nation (in Anderson’s sense) which is territorially bounded.

In Chapter 2, I go beyond this simplified account of Anderson’s concepts to consider the long line of intellectual inquiry into what constitutes the nation and the processes by which national identities are formed and sustained over time. Without oversimplifying, it is safe to say that a debate emerged in the 1980s in which the nation is regarded as either a wholly modern fabrication or as derived from pre-existing ties and traditions that have always bound communities together.<sup>4</sup> I do not try to arbitrate between these positions, and it seems probable that they apply in distinct ways to different cases – arguably there are nations, such as the Armenians, with “ancient” or “historic” roots and nations, such as the Palestinians, which have a more modern origin. In this study, I examine whether we can distinguish how the three nations have been “constructed” through an analysis of their representation in film. Can we detect how each has developed through the way it is re-imagined in the

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson’s definition is not *essentially* exclusionary since it does allow for people to be “invited” into the imagined community, but only within the bounds of a ‘limited and sovereign’ state (ibid.).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the exchange between Ernest Gellner (1996) and Anthony Smith (1996a; 1996b).

cinema? Is there any correlation between the representation of each nation and the stability of its claims to a specific territory and the resilience of its culture? I thread such comparisons through later chapters to argue that some such distinctions can, indeed, be made.

Despite differences of opinion about origins, there is general agreement that social communication binds a people into a community (Schlesinger, 2000). The insight that film is a powerful medium of such communication, taken together with the congruent premises that both the nation and film are “constructs”, inform numerous explorations of the way cinema is implicated in developing the abstract idea of the nation. Such studies habitually have been embedded in research on national cinema which, prior to the 1980s, tended to focus almost exclusively on the relationship between cinema and the state (Kuhn, 2006:3).

## **Cinema and the state**

Almost since its inception, cinema has been intimately involved in ‘the cultural articulation of the nation-building and sustaining projects of states’ (Shapiro, 2004:142). It assumed the important roles of projecting the ideals of the state (chiefly in times of crisis), delivering propaganda, and serving as a focus of cultural patriotism. Robert Burgoyne’s study of American cinema, for example, notes the ‘central position occupied by film in the articulation of national identity’ (1997:6). And, although Alan Williams casts doubt on the effectiveness of film (especially fiction) as a means of promoting specific ideologies, he acknowledges its ability to ‘*reflect and keep in circulation* values and behaviour associated with a particular [state]’ (2002:6-8). Thus, for nation-building (as well as economic) purposes, many states have enthusiastically sponsored their cinema industries.

The concept of national cinema grew out of this for reasons that Philip Rosen usefully itemises as the ‘*pragmatics* of filmmaking’ and the ‘*heuristics* of scholarship’ (1996:386-391). Simply put, many film-makers base their search for funding and institutional support on the precept of making film that can be categorised as belonging to a specific national (i.e. state) cinema. For film scholarship, the concept provides an explanatory and organising principle for bodies of work that may otherwise be resistant to analysis. And, logically, it brings together ‘a large number of agents, institutions, and/or textuality as some kind of unity, which [may then be]

aligned with a nation for descriptive assertions and/or explanatory reasoning’ (ibid.:388).

The national cinema model, however, is problematic as an analytic tool since it embodies two politically entwined but not well related issues: the economics of a state-based film industry, and the aesthetics of the “national image” constructed by the texts. With the increasingly international nature of film production, distribution, and consumption, questions of definition emerged. *Wedding in Galilee* (Khleifi, 1987), discussed later in this thesis, is a pertinent example. It has been classified as an Israeli film though it is about a Palestinian village in Israel, made by a Palestinian living and working in Belgium, with mainly Palestinian actors, and with Belgian and French funding. Thus, on grounds of attribution alone, the state-centred categorisation of film has lost much of its rationale.

At the same time that the provenance of films has become progressively more ambiguous, so have what Stephen Crofts calls their ‘expressions of a putative national spirit’ (2000:386). In many instances the image of the nation that a film is attempting to project has become more problematic. For example, the Turkish film, *Journey to the Sun* (Ustaoğlu, 1999), challenges the very notion of a homogenous Turkish state.

A general fragmentation of the national image coincides with growing instability in the idea of the nation itself. National identity has become even more of a slippery term in the modern era – an individual’s willingness to identify with a state or nation often is conditional and changeable, and may have to compete with other intense ways of belonging, such as to a religious, social, or ethnic group. A Kurdish woman may see herself, at different times, as a woman, a Sunni Muslim, a Turkish citizen, a Kurd, or a member of a particular clan. Furthermore, as the cultural boundaries of states and nations have become more fluid and permeable, identification has become less dependent even on living within a specific territory. Many of the strongest forms of national association occur in practice among diasporic communities such as the Kurdish population in Germany or the Armenian populations in France and North America.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> My use of the term ‘diaspora’ in this thesis follows Sheffer’s definition which may be paraphrased as a recognisable people (ethno-community) who as a result of voluntary or forced migration live outside their traditional homeland (2002:9).

Tracking this instability of identity, the primacy of a state-centred approach to the study of film has come under increasing pressure. There have been many contributions to the debate about its direction, here I will simply refer to the main threads that situate my research in its theoretical context.

### ***National cinema studies***

Andrew Higson, in an influential article in *Screen* (1989), was one of the first to suggest that the term national cinema is not the most appropriate to describe the products of a state. His position was reinforced by Rosen, who convincingly makes the case that there has always been a predilection to ignore the latent geographical and historical fissures of a state in the attempt to find unity in its production of film. Rosen diagnoses these lacunae as being rooted in the needs of 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building to assign validity to the state only when it is grounded in a nation:

Not only is the political geography designated by state borders divisible into different regions and even “nations” ... but also ... “national” characteristics spill across state borders both culturally and economically. [S]uch instabilities are also fundamentally “temporal,” insofar as the nation realizes itself within state borders only at certain times. This is why the attribution of nationality to a cinema tends towards periodization. (1996:390)

Rosen’s final point is echoed by Susan Hayward who concludes that ‘[j]ust as the cultural specificity of a nation changes over the course of its history, so too do its artefacts, including cinema’ (1999:106).

To address these concerns, Stephen Crofts proposed a taxonomy for national cinema which offers a set of narrower and more specific categories (1993; 2000). Close scrutiny of his classification reveals its inadequacy in dealing with widely diverse cinema such as that produced in India or China, yet it is helpful in a number of ways. It warns of the tendency to see films listed under the rubric of a state as wholly representative of its people, and argues against the homogenising effects of such national cinema discourse which ‘crowd[s] out more complex articulations of national identity’ including the hybrid and diasporic (1993:62). It also problematises the study of marginal film given the limited availability of texts due to unreliable funding and poor production conditions. And, finally, it enables Crofts to highlight the issue of ‘cross-cultural reception’. He cautions that many of these texts may remain ‘impervious to outside readings’ or are susceptible to ‘misreadings’ (ibid.:61), a point I will return to later.

These, and many other scholars, have re-positioned national cinema theory to accommodate the more complex and less homogenous vision of the nation and the state emerging from the debates on nationalism and national identity that I outlined earlier. However, there remains a certain tension in the study of national cinema as it strains to deal with notions of national identity in diasporas, post-colonial states, and stateless or multi-state nations.<sup>6</sup> It is here that the analysis of oppositional cinema, largely associated with Third World film production, has proved valuable.

## **Oppositional cinema**

Forms of cinema practice concerned with the expression of cultural identity and resistance to oppression reached an apogee in Latin America in the early 1970s. Film was an instrument for the practical expression of a political theory that espoused militant reaction to specific social and economic circumstances (Burton, 1985:3-4). Though never a single, homogenous movement, it became reified in the 1980s by a number of Western critics as ‘Third Cinema’, a label that was extended to cover film-making practices throughout the Third World.

Teshome Gabriel originated the analysis of Third World film production in terms of a theoretical structure of cinema. However, his definition that ‘Third Cinema includes an infinity of subjects and styles’, and that its ‘principal characteristic is really not so much where it is made, or even who makes it, but, rather the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays’ (1982:2-3), lacks precision. It also takes it some distance from the original *activist* intent of the film-makers, namely, that of proclaiming the ‘centrality of the projection circumstances and the use value of the film for militant *political* organizations’ (Buchsbaum, 2001:156).

Rather than attempting yet another definition, I prefer, like Julianne Burton, to use the terms marginal and oppositional cinema since they can be applied to the work of film-makers from any part of the world that address issues relevant to communities that believe themselves to be unrepresented by the state (1985:10). The efforts of Burton and others in analysing such cinema offer a number of valuable observations. First is Paul Willemen’s assertion that it includes film that is in the realms of research and experimentation; it is ‘forever in need of adaptation to the shifting dynamics at work in social struggles’ (1989:10). Thus, we should read into the experimentation of

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<sup>6</sup> For recent examples see Dennison (2006:1-12) and Vitali (2006:1-8).

film-makers such as Palestinian Elia Suleiman and Armenian Artavadz Pelechian, not just a resistance to dominant forms of cinema, but also a means of dealing with the social conditions they are trying to expose.

Secondly, as Burton reminds us, most oppositional film-makers are socially committed. Unlike traditional cinema, which presupposes

an anonymous, passive and socially fragmented audience who did their viewing in the impersonal and ritualised space of the conventional movie theatre, oppositional film-makers sought physical spaces and organisational formats which emphasised communality in order to encourage audience participation and feedback (1985:12)

An adjunct to this is the understanding that oppositional cinema stresses its *use value* – it returns to its activist roots. Commitment to the struggle for recognition of their rights to self-determination is one of the common features of many of the film-makers in this study. Certainly the funding of film units by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) during the 1960s and 1970s is a prime example of film being produced principally for its use value (see Chapter 7). Another instance is the more recent work of Rashid Masharawi in the refugee camps of Palestine (see Chapter 8). Partly born out of necessity, but also as an act of resistance, Masharawi created a travelling cinema and a viewing experience that emphasises the communal over the individual. I maintain that most cinema about my case studies is similarly activist in that it exposes the precarious nature of the culture of these nations and calls for resistance to their erasure.

Finally, there is Gabriel's attempt to define an aesthetics for oppositional cinema as an alternative to Western classical norms (1989). His 'Third Aesthetics' includes forms of historical narrative distinguished by a 'collective' subject instead of an individual protagonist; a 'non-hierarchical order' as opposed to an implicit hierarchy of subjects; and an 'emphasis on collective social space rather than on transcendental individual space' (ibid.:58-9). While these are useful insights, his claim that they 'resonate the cultural expression indigenous to most of the Third World today' (ibid.) is problematic. It homogenises a vast array of film-making practices and, by setting his aesthetics in opposition to a 'Western' norm, it also homogenises what it critiques. Furthermore, we should distinguish general opposition to cultural hegemony from the specific needs of marginal or minority groups within society to challenge a reductive view of their identity.

I would argue that any endeavour to impose a unifying aesthetic on such a broad range of work is misguided since it ignores ambiguity not only within a single text but also between different film-makers from the same tradition. Such ambiguities are revealed in relation to several of the films and film-makers in this study. For example, the aesthetics of Ustaoglu's critique of the treatment by the Turkish state of its Kurdish minority in *Journey to the Sun* are significantly different to those in *Sürü* (Güney, 1978), as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Therefore, I refrain from attributing a singular mode of address to the oppositional cinema included in my investigation. I maintain there is not one 'cinema of opposition' but multiple forms of opposition that depend on the social and political context in which the film-makers are working.

My film-makers come from different countries, ethnicities, and religious, social, and cultural backgrounds. Many live (or lived) under occupation, in exile, or in a diaspora. They work within different traditions and in different styles. Their films may be seen in commercial cinemas, art-house cinemas, at specialised film-festivals, in archives, on late-night television, or only on DVD and video.<sup>7</sup> But one of their common features is that (with some exceptions) they are marginal, or in terms that Hamid Naficy proposes, they work 'in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices' (2001:10). It is among such displaced and de-territorialised film-makers that Naficy theorises the existence of an 'accented style' and an 'accented cinema'.

### ***Accents and key symbols***

Naficy positions his accented cinema as 'one of the offshoots of Third Cinema' but defines it more precisely as

necessarily made by (and often for) specific displaced subjects and diasporized communities. Less polemical than the Third Cinema, it is nonetheless a political cinema that stands opposed to authoritarianism and oppression. If Third Cinema films generally advocated class struggle and armed struggle, accented films favor discursive and semiotic struggles (ibid.:30-31)

For him, it also is an '*engagé* cinema', but engaged less with the 'masses' and more with 'specific individuals, ethnicities, nationalities, and identities' (ibid.). Naficy's theory of style thus deals expressly with exilic and diasporic film-makers and

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<sup>7</sup> The provenance and original language of each of the films discussed in this thesis is shown in the Filmography.

‘transnational’ (cross-border) cultural issues, and includes feature films, documentaries, and experimental film.

This wide-ranging and thought-provoking text, is influential in current cinema studies, but is Naficy’s categorisation helpful for this research? Certainly, he focuses on many of my film-makers, and provides some constructive insights into their work. Perhaps more important though is his application of Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘chronotope’<sup>8</sup> as a method of analysing how the condition of exile or statelessness is expressed in film. His illustrations of the way various film-makers use space and time to construct imaginary homelands gives valuable prominence to the idea of “border consciousness”, one of the central themes that runs through my analysis of films in this study. It also provides a lead into Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of time and narrative disruption that I discuss in Chapter 2.

However, while I subscribe to Naficy’s notion of liminal film-makers being accented by virtue of their marginalisation and displacement, perhaps he goes too far when he suggests this constitutes a ‘mammoth, emergent, transnational *film movement* and film style’ (ibid.:18-19, emphasis added). Though the majority of my film-makers would be considered liminal, they are too diverse and concerned with a different range of problems to be characterised as a movement.

It is constructive at this point to remind ourselves of one of the main purposes of the theoretical frameworks I have been reviewing. Naficy puts it succinctly when he maintains that ‘[h]ow films are conceived and received has a lot to do with how they are framed discursively’ (ibid.:19). The debate on national cinema has informed my research by suggesting more useful categorisations than the state-based one; by cautioning against homogenising the nation or what it is contrasted with; and by highlighting the attention that must be given to the historical and political context. But it is the ‘received’ part of Naficy’s statement that remains troubling.

If there is no unifying aesthetic (and Naficy is careful not to suggest a homogenous Accented Cinema) what tools can those scholars conditioned to think in Western academic terms use to interpret marginal, liminal, “foreign” film? In particular, can such film be received in the way it was conceived? Willemsen is

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<sup>8</sup> Naficy follows Bakhtin in taking the chronotope (“time-space”) as a unit of analysis for films made in the margins of society and the cultural forces that produce them (ibid.:152-5).

certainly doubtful about this, pointing out that Third Cinema – often regarded as an *auteur's* cinema – frequently has its politics elided in favour of its ‘authorial artistry’ (1989:9). He also problematises two kinds of interpretation: ‘projective appropriation’, that is when a critical theory from one culture is projected onto the ‘signifying practices’ of another; and ‘ventriloquist identification’, when critics imagine themselves to be sufficiently steeped in another culture to be able to speak for it. He offers a third, and what he regards as a more appropriate response, ‘creative understanding’, which requires critical distance not only from another culture but also from one’s own (1995:28-30).

### ***The outsider position***

Willemen’s rigour is daunting. His argument suggests that from an “outsider” position our interpretation of cinematic elements may be based on false assumptions or mis-readings; we may simply overlook important cues due to translation issues or lack of familiarity with the culture; or we may fail to see diversity within a text because of the homogenising effect of its “foreignness”. I have tried to mitigate the problem of language by using the services of native language speaking interpreters in a number of cases. While not totally satisfactory, I draw comfort from the similar problems encountered by Naficy when viewing the work of his ‘accented’ film-makers (2001:3-4).

Shohat and Stam raise the equally problematic issue of ‘unthinking’ European assumptions about the meaning of certain cinematic techniques such as point-of-view, framing, and movement (1994). And, of course, Edward Said’s influential *Orientalism* (2003) describes major, self-imposed barriers to Western understanding of Middle Eastern cultures. Does this mean there is no room for the outsider in such studies?

I think an opening can be found in Willemen’s extended description of the ‘creative understanding’ approach which, he argues, ‘concentrates on the need to understand the dynamics of a particular cultural practice’ (1995:33). I have interpreted this to mean analysing a given film text while engaging, as far as possible, with the cultural and political context in which it operates. To deconstruct the cultural elements crucial to the distinctive identity of a community I have adapted a methodology suggested by anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1973). In brief, the initial task is to uncover key ‘symbolic units’, such as words or phrases, patterns of

behaviour, artefacts, rituals, myths, and so on. Then it is necessary to isolate those that make a frequent appearance, those that a film-maker focuses on, those that appear in several different contexts, and those that are elaborated in different ways. Finally, applying these techniques to a study of the representation of national identity in cinema, requires that the key symbols and metaphors contained in film texts are associated with corresponding social, political, and historical accounts of the community.

Key symbols, which are discussed more fully in Chapter 2, are related in some respects to Naficy's accents, though they are distinct. "The border" and "border crossings", for example, are specific key symbols in film about the Kurds, but a general awareness of borders is an accent that inflects the work of many marginal film-makers. Taken together, locating accents and key symbols in a body of film, provide, as I show in this study, a cogent way of interpreting the work of such film-makers.

This brings me to Willemen's concern about maintaining a 'double outsidership', that is, of maintaining a critical distance both from another culture and one's own when interpreting "foreign" cultures (1995:33). I am not entirely convinced that it is possible to achieve the necessary detachment, but in order to minimise this affect on my interpretation of the representations of other cultures I have chosen to apply a comparative approach using as case studies the three nations to which I have already referred.

In selecting the Armenians, Kurds, and Palestinians as subjects for study I have taken account of their similarities, such as disputes over territory and major historical traumatic events, and distinguishing features, such as the way national consciousness has been developed and sustained and their success or failure in achieving autonomy. These factors, which are elaborated in Chapter 2, make them most apt for a comparative study that addresses some of Willemen's concerns over the outsider position. Comparisons of the social and political context, and the way film contributes to representation of each nation, occur throughout subsequent chapters of this thesis.

## **Organising principles**

The state-centred approach cannot, however, simply be ignored when analysing national identity in film. States frequently set the agenda by defining such things as the language and themes of their cinema. They try to enforce homogenisation through propaganda and suppress through censorship that which they consider subversive. As I show later, Soviet cinema has had a powerful impact on the cinematic representation of Armenians; Turkish cinema on the Kurds; and Israeli cinema (and Hollywood) on the Palestinians. My point of departure from much previous scholarship is that I wish to avoid being constrained by the artificial boundaries of national cinema studies. Thus, I have included film from a variety of sources as well as those that emanate from existing state cinemas. For example, I argue that certain Turkish and Iranian films contribute significantly to the re-imagining of Kurdish identity.

Similarly, I resist Naficy's concentration on grouping films according to stylistic elements that express liminality, especially the condition of exile or being in a diaspora. While many of my film-makers do exhibit some of his characteristics, I reason that the "national" element in their work has at least as strong a binding force as stylistic categorisations. My analysis shows that, for example, the liminality expressed in films by Palestinians such as Michel Khleifi and Elia Suleiman is qualitatively different to that of Armenians such as Atom Egoyan and Henri Verneuil. These differences are, I claim, due to the different social, political and historical contexts of the Palestinians and Armenians.

Despite criticism of the national cinema concept, I recognise the need for an organising principle to provide coherence to this study. I have reviewed the literature on cinema and identity in order to draw lessons for my research and also to seek a framework in which to set the output of a variety of film-makers from different backgrounds, working in different contexts, and with complex forms of cinematic representation. But it is not my intention to develop a new theory of national cinema. Instead, I offer a more modest proposal which is to categorise these works by means of the rubric of "cinema regarding nations".

### ***Cinema regarding nations***

I use the term "regarding" in the title of this thesis for its multiple meanings that encapsulate the aims of my study. First, and perhaps most obviously, because it

positions cinema as *observing* the nation. Film observes a nation not through “reflection” of society, but rather in the way it re-imagines and re-presents a reality using the traditions, myths, symbols, and so on, of its culture, as well as the formal repertoire of the medium. Even where film-makers shun convention and deploy new formal methods, such as Egoyan in *Ararat* (2002), or Suleiman in *Homage by Assassination* (1991), these have to operate within the meaning systems of the culture they are addressing. In this respect film is not passive, rather it is ‘the ideological construct of an active observer’ (Erdoğan, 2001:533). And here, Naficy’s schematics help uncover the ideological positions from which these nations are being observed. For example, *A Song for Beko* (Ariç, 1992) represents the myth of an idyllic rural Kurdistan from the position of an exile’s longing and nostalgia for a lost homeland.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, it is cinema that is *concerned with* the nation, that is it does not simply represent a nation but is part of the discourse on nationhood. Thus, the films under consideration fit with the concepts of oppositional or activist cinema, discussed earlier, that are directly involved in the construction and maintenance of national identity. For example, the Palestinian films previously cited are intended not only to support Palestinians in Palestine or the diaspora, but also to influence world opinion in favour of their cause. This cinema represents social and political conflicts that remain for the most part unresolved. And so the films highlight the issue of temporality, that is, the development of national consciousness and its variation over time, which is a central part of my analysis. I argue that, when addressing queries about the extent to which cinema represents the nation, it is necessary to take account of the historical context and the forces shaping the nation over any specific period.

Finally, it is cinema that is *about* the nation, that is, it is anchored in symbols and themes that are national. I have already touched on the concept of key symbols and how they may be used to interpret which elements of a film are significant to a particular community. In the next chapter I examine how symbols, ranging from the simple (like flags that summarise or synthesise experience) to the complex (that elaborate or help to organize experience), are used to develop themes in the cinema. But the question remains, how do we identify *national themes*? And, following on

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<sup>9</sup> In this thesis, I use the term, Kurdistan, to refer to those areas of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, that have a majority population of Kurds and that notionally could be considered the territory of the Kurdish people (see map in Chapter 5).

from that, how do we qualify what a film is actually about? How do we determine whether the nation is a primary theme or merely tangential?

### ***Themes of the nation***

In many cases, cinema acts as an unconscious means of re-affirming national identity by, for example, use of the “national” language and common speech patterns, casual glimpses of a familiar *mise-en-scène*, appearance of the characters, and so on. Even specific national symbols, such as the flag which is routinely flown on public buildings and at official ceremonies, frequently go unnoticed. However, habitual though such symbols are, they contribute to what Michael Billig calls ‘banal nationalism’, a means by which the idea of the nation is constantly reinforced by the state (1995:93).

At first glance, none of these elements would stir much interest and it would be difficult to claim that their presence in a film *necessarily* constitutes an explicit national theme. Indeed, Mette Hjort, in her informative essay on a thematic approach to national cinema, is properly doubtful that the mere presence of banal images is sufficient to constitute a theme, noting that they may be a part of the film-maker’s attempt at realism (2000:108-9). But, I suggest, however banal a set of symbols may appear to be, in certain circumstances their use constitutes a subtle form of power, not only by what they make seem “normal” but also by what they elide. It is no coincidence that much Turkish and Israeli cinema engages in what Edward Said calls ‘the dialectic of the visible and the invisible’ (2006:1) which makes the “absence” of the Kurdish or Palestinian people appear part of the fabric of life in those states.

Hjort, on the other hand, rightly claims that for a film to be *about* the nation, the nation must be ‘explicitly thematised’: that attention must be focused on such elements (ibid.:110-11). In subsequent chapters, I show how various film-makers emphasise national elements such as the homeland through cinematography and creating heightened emotional responses. Nonetheless, I also maintain that where state power is exercised against a national community, as in the cases on which this study is based, even everyday images of the nation may come to the forefront as weapons in the struggle for recognition or survival.

## Research design

In summary, this study brings together a body of work, from various sources, in which “the national” is an element that is either dominant or significant. The principles behind the selection of films are, first, that they contain narratives, key symbols, and examples of accent or stress that inflect them with types of national consciousness that, taken together, constitute national themes. The films in which these themes are prominent and are repeated elsewhere, by different film-makers, form the basis of a collection for deeper analysis. The key films in the Armenian case are divided equally between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora; in the Kurdish case films from Turkey are balanced by those from Iraq, Iran, and the diaspora; and in the Palestinian case, while a large part of the material studied is from three film-makers active since the 1980s – Khleifi, Suleiman, and Masharawi – a representative sample is included of films from earlier periods and from the new generation of young film-makers.

The second principle is that the selection embraces a range of film-making modes and genres; it includes fiction, documentary, short-films, ‘art’ film, and ‘film art’. I have had to exclude most “popular” film, musicals, comedy, and animation, some of which could also claim to provide valid representations of national identity. However, the diversity of films is sufficient to show the complexity of identity in each case by presenting different perspectives of various sectors of society, as we will see in the work of, for example, Güney and Khleifi. Similarly, the wide range of film-makers reveals issues of power relationships that are often masked by a single (and sometimes nationalist) point-of-view. For example, though historically these are all deeply patriarchal societies, the variety of perspectives exposes numerous ambiguities among the different film-makers on the role of women in constructing national identity.

I have indicated my preference for a taxonomy of films “regarding nations” and, in limiting the scope of this study to a consideration of films as texts to be viewed for ideological content, I de-emphasise modes of production, the economics of distribution, and analysis of audience reception. I recognise that film texts are only part of a discourse, and that audiences play a significant part in making meaning from films. However, I would argue that an analysis that relates a text to its political, historical, and social context adds significantly to that discourse.

The study is comparative, contrasting different representations of each nation, and tracing changes to these that have resulted from historical events. It addresses four central questions:

- In the cinema regarding each of my cases, what are the major symbols, themes, and stylistic elements that can be uncovered? How has each nation been represented by different film-makers?
- For each case is there any coherence, or unifying aesthetic, to these representations that might be understood as “defining” that nation?
- Are the representations for each nation distinctive from the others? And, if so, can these distinctions be related to their different social and political contexts?
- Do the representations show change over time that may be related to the historical process of formation and maintenance of a distinctive identity?

Thus, I try to find unity in the representation of a nation while acknowledging that nations are heterogeneous. I also try to withstand being drawn into each nation’s illusion of its own uniqueness and difference from its neighbours and to avoid locking the study into what Willemsen calls an ‘ethnographic notion of authenticity’ (1994:208).

My research supports a critical analysis of the work of groups of film-makers which is otherwise fragmented, mainly as a result of the situation in which they have to function. While I would not claim the framework is a major theoretical contribution to national cinema studies, I make the case that it provides a valuable means of bringing together film about nationalism and national identity. By removing artificial barriers between such classes as poor, marginal, and diasporan cinema, and bringing them into juxtaposition with art cinema, commercial cinema, and experimental cinema, I have taken an approach that is, I believe, distinct from most current studies and one that may constructively be applied to other cases.

I have also deepened the relationship between film studies and studies of national identity and nationalism by linking the “constructedness” of nations more clearly to the way film-makers construct a notion of identity. The issues that I have focused on are the *processes* of nation formation, that is the way in which national consciousness is raised, and the way identity is sustained. Thus, I map scholarly literature on the development of national consciousness in each nation to symbols and themes present in the films under consideration. This mapping is uncommon and, I believe, provides an important adjunct to both streams of scholarship.

Finally, although I have drawn on extant analyses of individual films and film-makers, I have developed my own interpretations according to the principles I outlined earlier. In this, I have elaborated a connection between the exploration of key accents, symbols, and themes in film, that extends current critical practice.



This chapter has introduced the main strands of my research. Chapter 2 begins with a more detailed investigation of the meaning of the nation and national identity when applied to stateless nations and diasporas, pulling out the debates that can be explored productively through film. It draws on the texts referred to previously, but specifically connects their arguments to cinema. Using these ideas, I elaborate the case outlined above for an analysis of film based on isolating key symbols embedded in the texts, and conclude with the definition of a set of themes that frame my subsequent examination of groups of films.

The body of the thesis consists of six chapters, two for each case study, which include detailed textual analysis of a number of key films, relating them to the social and political context of each nation. Chapter 3 examines the work of the most prominent film-makers in the period when Armenia was a Republic of the USSR. Over this time, several distinct phases of film-making are identified that reflect changes of the political mood in Moscow: from an attempt to re-vitalise national culture while at the same time modernising, through repression, to a new national awakening. Chapter 4, on the other hand, is concerned with cinema from the Armenian diaspora, again splitting the work into phases: a period characterised by suppression and concealment, followed by a national cultural resurgence in the 1970s and 80s, and then a period of deep introspection on the meaning of Armenian identity.

Chapter 5 focuses on Turkey the only country (of the four that are principally home to the Kurds) where important cinematic activity regarding the Kurdish community occurred before the 1980s. Much of the analysis centres on the work of Yilmaz Güney and the struggle of the Kurds for recognition. Chapter 6 is more wide-ranging, looking at oppositional Turkish cinema since the early 1980s as well as the growing interest in cinema about the Kurds from Iraq and Iran, and the diaspora. It reveals the development of a Kurdish identity that transcends the notion of borders.

Chapter 7 begins with an analysis of the effects of Zionist<sup>10</sup> propaganda film and anti-Arab Hollywood films on the articulation of Palestinian identity. It discusses the beginnings of a counter-narrative in the Palestinian “revolutionary cinema” of the 1960s and 70s which created a space in which Palestinian identity could be re-asserted. It concludes by identifying tensions within Palestinian society revealed in the work of a new generation of film-makers from the early 1980s. Chapter 8 focuses on the period after the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation since when film-makers have contributed significantly to the discourse of resistance.

Throughout these chapters, I compare and contrast the way the development and survival of each nation has been represented and relate this to the historical context. The conclusion, Chapter 9, brings together various threads of the arguments to address the questions laid out earlier.

This thesis does not attempt to give an exhaustive account of the totality of film about each of the case study nations. Similarly, I have not attempted to analyse all the possible interpretive frameworks that might be used to dissect national identity in film. However, I have avoided restrictive conventional approaches that concentrate, for example, only on the work of *auteurs*, “movements”, genres, or “great works”, relying instead on my broad category of cinema regarding nations. With my comparative view I have tried to mitigate the outsider position as far as possible but I would not claim to have achieved a native understanding of all the works involved. The study suggests there is scope for further work on the representation of national identity in the cinema, especially the cinema regarding stateless nations and diasporas.

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<sup>10</sup> I have used the term Zionism in this thesis strictly in its dictionary definition as a political movement, originating in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, that champions a Jewish homeland in the whole of Palestine. A Zionist person or entity is a supporter of that movement.

## Chapter 2 Perspectives on the Nation

The flags of three stateless nations<sup>1</sup> with which I introduced this thesis, have been used variously as a metonym for the nation, as a form of resistance to oppression, and as a way of expressing solidarity among the people. For example, Yasser Arafat invoked the flag in his premature hope for the establishment of a state for the Palestinian nation (quoted in Billig, 1995:41):

The Palestine state is within our grasp. Soon the Palestine flag will fly on the walls, the minarets and the cathedrals of Jerusalem (*Guardian*, 3 September 1993)

States even more determinedly summon the flag to bind their communities together. Predictably, then, flags with their strong symbolism and immediate recognition value, are a common feature of national discourse in the cinema. The Turkish state is “announced” by the flag flown at the official opening of the customs post in *Propaganda* (Çetin, 1999) and in that waved in *Drejan* (Gök, 1997) at a wedding ceremony (both discussed in Chapter 6). Flags are a symbol of Kurdish resistance in *Kilometre Zero* (Saleem, 2005), and Palestinian resistance in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (Suleiman, 1996). Such cinematic images are representative of the battles for legitimacy and the survival of national identity among these nations.

However, in contrast to stateless nations, for whom nationalism must be continuously active if the nation is to survive, states have only to invoke the nation openly at times of crisis such as incipient war, national celebrations, or mourning. At other times state nationalism may be dormant and go unnoticed even though it always remains near the surface. Michael Billig’s important insight is that such banal nationalism is also exclusive and very powerful; it insists on a single nation within a state. The shots in *Sürü* that introduce Ankara – the commonplace symbols of monuments and flags hanging unnoticed on state buildings – proclaim this as the capital of the Turkish nation. But from the perspective of the band of Kurdish shepherds arriving to deliver their sheep, these symbols assert that they are outsiders (see Chapter 5).

I have focused initially on these symbols not just because they may play an important role in the cinematic expression of national identity, but also as a reminder

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<sup>1</sup> The Armenians were a semi-autonomous republic in the Soviet era and have only achieved statehood since 1991.

of the power of nationalism, overt or banal, even in the most cosmopolitan societies. In this chapter, I probe more deeply into the intricate debate about the formation of nations, and the position of marginalised peoples and diasporas in their struggle to sustain cultural and national identity. I maintain that there is sufficient difference between two main lines of reasoning – one that emphasises the effects of modernity and the other that stresses the importance of origins – to suggest that different nations may be characterised in distinct ways. I examine my three cases to draw out how they are characterised, and continue by discussing the narratives, symbols, and themes with which they are represented in the cinema. First, however, I want to revisit two questions: what is the nation that nationalism tries to forge? And, how does it come into being?

### **What is the nation?**

I pointed out in Chapter 1 that one of the difficulties besetting this area of study is that some of the key terms are used interchangeably or inconsistently.<sup>2</sup> The “nation”, in particular, is a troubled term having acquired two distinct meanings. On the one hand, it is taken to mean *all* the inhabitants of a state, irrespective of the mix of its population. Since the vast majority of modern states contain a number of constituent communities (whether due to the way they were formed, to territorial acquisitions, or because of subsequent waves of inward migration) this definition is not without its problems. It suggests that all states consist entirely of people with a sense of common identity, whereas frequently ‘the state reflects only the culture of the dominant national group’ (Roberts, 1999:79).

Alternatively, the nation refers to any group of people having a significant number of the following characteristics: common myths of ancestry; common history; attachment to a territory or homeland; common public culture; consciousness of forming a community; and with aspirations for a common future.<sup>3</sup> Under this explanation there is no prerequisite that the nation must exist within a single independent state nor that the members of the nation necessarily have a desire to form their own state.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Walker Connor (1978:83).

<sup>3</sup> These definitions appear in various forms in Smith (1991), Hutchinson (1994), Miller (1995), and Guibernau (1996) among others.

In the pre-modern world few rulers unambiguously controlled a territory or the people within it. As their authority waxed and waned territories altered shape accordingly; the fixed borders characteristic of modern states were virtually unknown. This situation changed in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when states began to be formed and borders were enshrined. But, as Billig demonstrates, there are no objective reasons for many of these borders – neither language, religion, ethnicity, nor geography can fully explain them. Rather, the state emerged from a battle for supremacy over territory and set about forging a nation in which ‘a part claims to speak for the whole [...] and to represent the national essence’ (op.cit.:27).

Thus, states define themselves by their physical or geographical *borders*, whereas nations are defined by their cultural *boundaries*. State nationalism patrols its borders and tries by either absorbing or purging its culture of “foreign” influences to make its cultural boundary coterminous with its border. Stateless nationalism, on the other hand, can only patrol its cultural boundaries in an attempt to ensure the survival of a distinct identity.

### ***Debate over origins***

The debate over the mechanism by which the transition from pre-modern communities to the modern nation took place has two competing threads. In one, a nation is a specifically modern invention that depends on such things as the growing ease of communication among its individuals (Deutsch, 1966); advances in print-capitalism (Anderson, 1983); the spread of mass higher education (Gellner, 1983); uneven economic development and trade (Nairn, 1977); or politically induced cultural changes (Brass, 1991) and (Breuilly, 1993). These scholars largely adhere to Hobsbawm’s notion that the myths and beliefs contributing to a people’s sense of cohesion with and obligation to their compatriots are, at best, an ‘invention’ (1983).

In a counter line of argument, John Armstrong, working forward from a study of medieval civilisations (1982), and Anthony Smith, working backwards from recent times (1986), favour accounts that emphasise the importance of early collective cultures in the development of nations. While still recognising the importance of state institutions, they demonstrate that nationalism rarely creates nations from a blank sheet. Or, as David Miller puts it, national communities are held together ‘by a dense web of customs, practices, implicit understandings, and so forth’, where ‘even the physical landscape bears the imprint of the historical development of the community’

(1995:41-42). For these scholars, nationalism reproduces or reinforces group affinities whose roots lie in a common culture and common experience.

There is a tendency to treat these two models as mutually exclusive, whereas they actually have much in common, in particular the persuasive idea that the *ability* to communicate the imaginings of belonging to the same nation provides the basis for forging nationality. And both models presuppose that positive action by an elite is required to raise national consciousness. Action that is neatly described by Miroslav Hroch as a three stage process: formulation of the idea of a nation by intellectuals; followed by the generation of a mass movement in support; and finally translation of the idea into the reality of a state (1985).

However, there are crucial differences between the two broad theories. While the former, *modernist*, strand provides convincing arguments for the formation of a nation within a state, these models fail to explain the persistence of identity where the nation is stateless or is colonised by another state. The latter, *perennialist*, theory addresses this issue when it claims that a further necessary condition is a set of core values on which the nation is founded. I find the claim that an ancient or “ethnic” nation would be likely to display a more deeply grounded sense of its history compelling. It would lead us to expect such a nation to appear qualitatively different in cinema from one that has a less certain view of its origins.

## **Case studies**

The Armenians, Kurds, and Palestinians have all struggled for recognition as independent nations with the right to self-determination. They have some similarities, such as their disputes with one or more states over territory, a history of repression, and recent major traumatic events. And, the cinematic representation of issues concerning the construction and preservation of national identity are ubiquitous in each case. This, in part, is what makes them excellent subjects for this study of cinema regarding nations.

However, they also have important distinguishing features that reveal much about their origins. It is these differences, which I will now outline, that provide an insight into theoretical arguments about the way political consciousness has been formed and sustained.

## ***The Armenians***

The Armenians have a long recorded history, with a unique language, script, and religion, and significant associations with a broad sweep of territory in what is now Turkey and parts of the Caucasus (see map on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). They were recognisable as a national community by the 5<sup>th</sup> century with distinct characteristics that separated them from their neighbours (Suny, 1993a:8; Panossian, 2000:52-60; Gavakian, 1997:11-12). The Armenian diaspora is equally ancient, with large urban communities located throughout Europe and the Middle East since at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Sheffer, 2002:59). Though, at different times various Armenian leaders were able to exercise control over some areas of territory, they were unable to consolidate power and, after the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Armenia ceased to be a political, economic, intellectual or cultural centre of any significance’ (Panossian, 2000:83).

Strong nationalist movements were responsible for the resurgence of Armenian national consciousness in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in urban areas of the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia. Armenians could certainly be described as a nation by this time, but a nation divided geographically, culturally, socially, and economically. As the great empires collapsed, a series of clashes with the emergent Turkish regime culminated in the devastating genocide of 1915-23.<sup>4</sup> At the end of World War I (WWI), while the victorious Allies were deciding the future of the former Ottoman territories, Armenian nationalists unilaterally declared an independent republic. However, due to the disarray of the Allies and the determination of Kemal Atatürk<sup>5</sup> to establish a Turkish state, the Armenians were abandoned (MacMillan, 2001:375-80). By 1921, half the remaining population was scattered in a new diaspora and the rest survived as a republic of the Soviet Union, cut off geographically and politically from the rest of the nation.

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<sup>4</sup> The massacre of Armenians in various centres commenced in the 1870s but accelerated from 1915 in what has been described as genocide. The figures are disputed (and successive Turkish governments refuse to acknowledge that genocide took place) but best estimates suggest 1.2-1.5 million Armenians were killed and another 200-350,000 were driven out over the period 1915-23. For further details on these events, see for example Hovannisian (1987), Walker (2004), Bloxham (2005), and Dadrian (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was leader of the Turkish independence movement from 1919 until becoming the first President of the Turkish state in 1923.

Soviet Armenia,<sup>6</sup> initially characterised by patriarchal family structures based on large extended families, was slow to modernise (Matossian, 1962:5-9). From the mid-1930s, despite Russian dominance and sporadic attempts at the suppression of Armenian culture, a separate identity was maintained through these family associations, the exercise of traditions, the influence of the church, a resurgent language and literature, and a close relationship to the land. In the large and widely dispersed diaspora, identity has been more elusive and variable particularly over the last half-century. In several centres, nationalist groups actively supported the preservation of the nation: promoting myths of origin, claiming that Armenians were the first to adopt Christianity (in 301 CE), and that the Armenian alphabet was developed as early as 406 CE by ‘divine inspiration’ (Gavakian, 1997:25). However, there were significant disputes between Middle Eastern communities and those in North America (Pattie, 1994:188-90). Furthermore, family ties tended to break down in the West, loosening the association between later generations and their ‘nation’ (ibid.:195). The preservation of identity in the diaspora has become something of a struggle in which *symbols* of being Armenian, such as the language, script, and monuments, and the *idea* of the church, play a major role.

Thus, Armenians most closely exemplify the perennialist model of development. But, modern Armenian national identity emerged in more than one centre and is correspondingly varied in its cultural composition. It is, as Panossian argues, ‘multilocal, multifaceted, and heterogeneous’ (op. cit.:50). What unites them as a nation, even if different parts of the community have little in common objectively, are their ancient culture and history, their collective memory, and their sense of loss due to the genocide and subsequent dispersal.

### ***The Kurds***

The Kurds have a less clearly defined cultural history though they too have occupied large areas of territory in the Ottoman, Russian and Persian Empires for thousands of years (see map on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). They have a notable oral tradition but not an extensive written literature or history. Their distinct language has two major variants and several different scripts (Hassanpour, 1989). Largely rural, and with different religious affiliations and social structures, they had

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<sup>6</sup> I have used the term Soviet Armenia throughout this thesis, rather than the more correct but long-winded Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

failed to develop a unified identity by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Barkey, 1998; O'Shea, 2004).

In the post-WWI settlement, the majority of Kurds were separated by the newly established borders of four states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They have a history of being repressed in their respective states, and, like the Armenians, have suffered massacres and ethnic cleansing.<sup>7</sup> Each state has tried to break down Kurdish social structures and to isolate one group from another. At different times, they have banned use of the Kurdish language and traditional dress, denied their right to use Kurdish names, closed Kurdish schools, and declared Kurdish associations and publications illegal (van Bruinessen, 1998:40).

Armed resistance movements developed in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran in the 1970s, and support for some forms of Kurdish autonomy emerged among Kurdish communities scattered around the world, particularly in Western Turkey, Germany, and Britain and various Arab states (Strohmeier, 2003). However, these have largely been contained with the connivance of major states which share the fear that a successful claim to Kurdish autonomy in one region will galvanise the irredentist hopes of Kurds in other regions.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a sense of Kurdish identity has been maintained in rural areas through language, music, traditions, festivals, and tribal allegiances. This has been reinforced by the economic inequality that has become evident to Kurds as they have migrated to urban centres or abroad. In the diaspora and in the semi-autonomous region of Iraq, there has been a rapid expansion of interest in early Kurdish culture, especially the subtle language of their 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Ahmed-i Khani and their vibrant folklore and musical forms (Shakely, 1992). And this interest has been disseminated to a wider population through books, newspapers, radio, television, and film (Natali, 2004b).

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<sup>7</sup> The wholesale massacre of civilians in Iraq in 1988, with up to 250,000 Kurdish deaths, amounted to genocide according to McDowall (2004:359). In Syria, it is estimated that about 300,000 Kurds have been declared stateless since the 1960s and so are denied passports, voting rights, ownership of property or land, and other basic rights (Lowe, 2006:3). Figures for Turkey vary widely, but it is estimated that several thousands of villages and hamlets in the Kurdish areas were destroyed or emptied in the period from 1984-1999, and 2.5-3.0 million villagers displaced (Ahmed, 2002:1-8; van Bruinessen, 1999).

Thus, the Kurds fit a modified modernist model of development where communications, unequal economic development, and migration have raised national consciousness, but where traditional elements of folklore, song, and oral storytelling play a significant part. Though no single Kurdish state seems likely to emerge in the near future, a fragile national unity has been achieved by emphasis on their unique way of life, myths of an idyllic homeland in a notional Kurdistan, and resistance to oppression.

### ***The Palestinians***

Arabs have inhabited the territory now controlled by the state of Israel for thousands of years. However, the emergence of a distinct Palestinian nation, that is, with the consciousness of an identity separate from the surrounding Arab nations, is of more recent origin. While Kimmerling and Migdal argue that the revolt in 1834 against Egyptian rule created the *conditions* that would enable the Arab population of Palestine later to develop into ‘a self-identified people’ (2003:xvi), Rashid Khalidi convincingly shows that the process of development of a mass Palestinian national consciousness only commenced early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1997:28). That this process intensified as a result of ineluctable Zionist settlement in Palestine, beginning towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and accelerating thereafter, is without doubt. That reaction to Zionism was the main cause is more in dispute, with Khalidi drawing attention to the parallel rise of nationalism in the surrounding states after de-colonisation (ibid.:20).

Following dissolution of the British mandate over Palestine, war broke out in 1948 between joint Arab forces and the newly declared Israeli state. A large number of Palestinians were killed or evicted from their lands and homes in what became known as *al-Nakba* or ‘The Disaster’.<sup>8</sup> Further loss of life and territory, resulting from the humiliating Arab defeat in the war of 1967, shifted the initiative from a pan-Arab nationalist struggle to a more specifically Palestinian one with the rise to prominence of the PLO (Jung, 2000:11). Attempts by Palestinians to create their own state and to recover territory lost to the Israelis has continued, with increasing violence by both sides. At the time of writing, Palestinians live under military rule in

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<sup>8</sup> Different sources provide widely differing statistics of the population transfers and deaths that took place at this time but the consensus seems to be that between 700,000 and 1 million Palestinian Arabs were forced to flee Israel. See, for example, Kimmerling (2003:156-66).

the Occupied Palestinian Territory, restricted by the separation Wall;<sup>9</sup> under attack in the Gaza Strip; and as a disenfranchised minority in the state of Israel (see maps on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). Many have remained within refugee camps for close on 60 years, others form a widespread diaspora in Middle Eastern states, Europe and North America.

Though the existence of a Palestinian people was repeatedly denied by Israel and though no Palestinian state has come into being and the people are under constant threat of dispersal, the Palestinian nation is now widely recognised by the international community. Critical to this has been the Palestinian claim to their land. Consequently the element of identity that is most prominent is the sense of place – the home, the village and the specific surrounding countryside with its landmarks, trees, fields and so on, rather than the overall historic lands of Palestine. Their Arab heritage and its cultural and intellectual strengths are a source of great pride, but Palestinians have developed a unique sense of identity through their love of the land, and their determination to resist erasure (Elmessiri, 1982). Thus, the Palestinians fit more closely the modernist model of development with additional cohesiveness engendered by the ever-present memory of the *Nakba* and their resistance to repression, dispossession, and fragmentation (Anderson, 2002:229).

### ***The diasporas***

In each of my cases, the diaspora plays a significant part in the development of national identity. As Gavakian argues, ‘diasporan nationalism is characterised by a unique intensity’ (1997:24) not least due to the vulnerability of such communities to assimilation. Thus territory and the longing to return and re-possess the homeland are particularly important. For many Armenians, “return” has looked towards restoration of “historic” territory in Turkey which carries strong religious and atavistic significance. For Kurds, on the other hand, it is a rather abstract “Kurdistan” that is viewed as the cradle of the nation and as a future homeland. And for the Palestinians, there are those displaced from present-day Israel who yearn to go back to their former homes, and those in exile who conceive of a unified Palestinian homeland. That the hope of return in each of these cases is no longer plausible often gives the diasporan communities:

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<sup>9</sup> In this thesis, I refer to the illegal barrier being built by Israel on Palestinian land as the Wall.

a rather nostalgic and romantic character [in which] the institutions of the “old world” are idealised, and the geography of the homeland sentimentalised and compared to heaven, or to a beautiful woman, or to a mother (ibid.:26).

As we shall see, intensity of expression and nostalgia for the past are much in evidence in the films analysed in the following chapters.

This much abridged introduction to my case study nations suggests that their origins span a spectrum ranging from the “historic” Armenians, through the Kurds with their looser connections to ancient myths, to the “modern” Palestinians. I will argue that the way these differences are enunciated in cinema provides a valuable understanding of the process of development of national identity. But, whatever the processes involved, there is more or less general agreement among scholars that it relies on the conscious construction of a national narrative and the use of symbols, myths, fables and allegories of sufficient strength to bind the nation together. I will come back to a discussion of the symbolic representation of nations in the cinema, but first, I want to examine what are the stories told about each nation and how they differ.

## **Narratives of the nation**

In a seminal lecture, delivered in 1882, Ernest Renan argued that the nation consists of two parts:

One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is current consent, the desire to live together, the willingness to continue to maintain the value of the heritage that one has received as a common possession (reproduced in Eley, 1996)

Renan’s ‘legacy of memories’ is actually a story of the past told by people who consent to form a nation. As Kwame Appiah asserts, this story is constructed by ‘holding on to some events and by letting go of others. It may also include a certain amount of unacknowledged invention’ (2003:35). Narratives of the nation (whether fabricated or not) are rarely orderly and rarely continuous; they are woven together from those scattered elements of their history that people prefer to remember, omitting those that may be best forgotten, and including many that are fictional.

In pre-modern ethnic societies, memories of the past were kept alive most often by oral and other forms of popular culture and, exceptionally, by written histories and religious texts. In the transition to a modern nation, these ancient memories were reinforced by institutions such as schools, universities, museums, and archives, and in such physical entities as memorials and the names of streets.

Collectively, they make up the national narrative told to the people through literature, the media and visual arts, and the histories of monuments, anthems, and flags. In this study it is the film narratives that are of primary concern.

In Soviet Armenia, though restricted by censorship, these tell of a scattered people, the loss of much of the homeland, and the trauma of the genocide. They expose divisions in Armenian society between rich and poor, and the stultifying effects of patriarchal power and an outdated honour code. And they convey continuity of the nation over a long period through frequent invocation of the church, ancient culture and history, traditions, the family, and the close relationship of the people to the land.

Kurdish narratives also reveal the economic and social repression of the people, their separation by state borders, and their solidarity through resistance. They expose deep divisions in society, not only between the sexes but also at a tribal level. They relate bleak stories of migration between country and city, across the borders that divide different parts of Kurdistan, and to foreign lands. There are some references to an ancient, independent Kurdish kingdom, but above all the stories articulate the nation by affirming its cultural boundaries and through the association of the people with their rugged mountainous territory.

With a more contemporary focus than the other cases, Palestinian stories are of invasion and oppression. They tell of armed soldiers patrolling the land, the creeping spread of Israeli occupation, incessant checkpoints, inhumane clearances, and brutal evictions. They show an outdated patriarchal structure impotent in the face of defeat. Their stories also are of lands lost, but not just impersonal lands, rather particular things like olive trees, stone houses, and villages. They convey the love of these things and set them against the sterile confinement of refugee camps and threatened homes in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. These accounts communicate a stubborn resistance, a determination to stay put and wait for their rights as a nation to be recognised.

Extensive examples of these narratives are included in subsequent chapters and reflect much of the unique historical and social context of each nation. But it is their characteristically cinematic aspects that I now want to address.

## Form and visual style

Many films concerning my case study nations exhibit ‘accents’ that Naficy relates to the film-makers’ liminal existence in exile. They focus on disturbing places of transition that suggest rupture and displacement, for example in *Next of Kin* (Egoyan, 1983) and *Canticle of the Stones* (Khleifi, 1990); frightening border crossings in *A Time for Drunken Horses* (Ghobadi, 2000) and *Divine Intervention* (Suleiman, 2002); and tortuous journeys of migration and exile in *Sürü* and *Otobüs* (Okan, 1976).

Naficy asserts that exilic film-makers have a deep concern with territory, ‘a preoccupation with place’ (2001:5) that is expressed in what he terms “open” and “closed” chronotopes. In my cases, these are manifested in idealised visions of the homeland in *Wedding in Galilee*, as a pastoral idyll in *We Are, Our Mountains* (Malyan, 1970) and *A Song for Beko*, or as wide, open landscapes in *At* (Özgentürk, 1982). Alternatively life in exile is expressed by characters who are trapped in claustrophobic spaces of confinement, as in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Yol* (Güney, 1982); and where an attempted return takes the form of endless striving in *Yearning* (Dovlatyan, 1990), or as melancholia in *Haifa* (Masharawi, 1996).

At the heart of Naficy’s thesis is the idea that the condition of exile induces forms of creativity bound up with extremes of loss or lack. And his view that exilic film-makers operate ‘in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices’ (ibid.:10) provides a useful insight into the way many of them represent their identity. But, while such anxieties are manifestly evident in the films I analyse, I maintain that among my film-makers there is an altogether deeper concern with the nation.

Returning to Renan, his claim that the national narrative is a form of “collective memory” suggests we should scrutinize closely instances where these film-makers from their position of liminality distort and fragment the narrative. Are they questioning an established version of the collective memory? Does their work challenge the way a history of the nation has been constructed?

It is here that Gilles Deleuze’s examination of film is helpful. First, as interpreted by Laura Marks, Deleuze shows that the visual and the verbal may present different forms of “truth” about events that reflect different aspects of the way we remember (1994:247-9). In film, gaps between what we experience visually and what

a film “tells” us are not uncommon, but they acquire a particular meaning in diasporan film. It seems as if they represent an indeterminate space in which we are asked to arbitrate between two different versions of events. The Armenian national narrative, for example, is questioned and challenged in this way in *Family Viewing* (Egoyan, 1987), *Jagadakeer .... between the near and east* (Bastajian, 2001), and *The Girl From Moush* (Torossian, 1993), as I discuss in Chapter 4.

Secondly, Deleuze’s study of the ‘time-image’,<sup>10</sup> shows how disruptions (for example, the taking of a photograph or making of a video) may be used to create the notion of bifurcation of time. At the moment such images are made, time splits. Reality (that is, the film we are watching) continues, but the images (photographs, still frames, or inserts of different media, such as video) remain an ‘institutionalized representation of the moment’ (ibid.:251). Broken narratives with irregular time schemes as in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, frozen images from *Ma’loul Celebrates Its Destruction* (Khleifi, 1985), the disjuncture between image and sound of *Calendar* (Egoyan, 1993), suggest moments of transition when a choice is made by the protagonists or the *possibility* of different versions of the narrative.

In summary, disruptions to narrative space and time are amenable to different theoretical analyses. Naficy sees the concentration on issues of territory and space deriving principally from the stressed condition of exile and marginality. Deleuze, on the other hand, sees the fragmentation and convolution of time as an expression of the multiplicity of available historical narratives. Both interpretations inform the study of formal methods employed by my film-makers. However, as I indicated in Chapter 1, images are also important for isolating cultural elements that are distinct to a community. I now turn to an examination of some of the key symbols, as they appear in the cinema, and to consider how they differentiate the three nations.

## Images and symbols

Key symbols, as defined by Ortner, range across a spectrum from ‘summarising’ to ‘elaborating’. The former, like flags and maps, ‘synthesise a

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<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, drawing on Bergson’s philosophy, distinguishes two methods of image-making in the cinema: the linear, ‘movement-image’ in which a viewer is led through disjointed spaces by the actions of a protagonist, and the non-linear and usually discontinuous ‘time-image’ in which the passage of time itself becomes the focus (2005a; 2005b).

complex system of ideas [into] a unitary form [which] “stands for” the system as a whole’ (1973:1340). Thus, as we have seen, the Turkish flag, required to be flown over all public buildings and at official ceremonies, is a powerful summarising symbol of the Turkish state. The flag and the map are generic summarising symbols, but there are more complex images to be found, such as those below, which contain intricate metaphors specific to each nation and its history.

The first shows the twin snow-covered peaks of Mount Ararat hovering in the background above a line of apricot trees in blossom. Images of the mountain appear in one form or another in a high proportion of films about Armenians, from the logo of the Soviet Armenian film studios in the early films of Hamo Bek-



Nazarov to the real and the false Mt. Ararat in *Ararat* and *What’s All the Noise of the River About* (Melik-Avagyan, 1958), as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

One of the founding myths of the Armenian nation is that of Haik who slew the evil god Bel and established Armenia around Mt. Ararat. Thus the people are known as Hai and their land as Haiastan – a linguistic turn that Egoyan makes use of in *Family Viewing*. This story has a number of powerful symbolic components: it sets up Armenia as the cradle of all civilisations (Noah’s Ark was supposed to have landed on the slopes of Ararat after the Flood); it establishes the Armenian nation through a rebellion against tyranny; it centres the nation’s origins in freedom, independence and justice; and it enshrines Mt. Ararat as the national icon of all Armenians.

The second image is of lush spring pastures high up in rural Kurdistan, cradled by a ring of rugged mountains. Though the rural experience is increasingly atypical in Kurdish society – the majority now live in cities – the mountainous rural idyll is an intrinsic part of the culture.



The summer pasture where sheep are taken to graze is a recurrent symbol of Kurdistan. For many Kurds the mountain defines the geography of their lands; ‘the idea of Kurdistan ... is characterised by an almost mystical view of the mountain, as imaginary as well as a real place’ (McDowall, 2004:3). These Kurdish pasturelands are the focus of attention in *A Song for Beko* and *Sürü*, as shown in Chapters 5 and 6.

The final image shows an ancient Palestinian olive tree set in a field of scattered stones. Olive trees are an essential part of the Palestinian landscape. They are the second major crop of the country; used to produce olive oil, olive wood furniture and olive based soap.



Olive trees represent the Palestinian nation and people’s ties to the land, their communal rootedness and identity. They are a ‘potent symbol of Palestinian nationalism and resistance’ (Parmenter, 1994:23). Palestine, thus, is characterised as ‘a mothering earth of soil, trees, and stone’ (ibid.:44), exemplified by the olive trees and the stone ruins of Palestinian villages in *Fertile Memory* (Khleifi, 1980) and *Ma’loul Celebrates Its Destruction*, as described in Chapters 7 and 8.

At the other end of Ortner’s spectrum are elaborating symbols which contribute to the ordering or ‘sorting out [of] complex and undifferentiated feelings

and ideas' (ibid.). That is, they organise experience through static images that act as metaphors and key scenarios, including rituals, that suggest action.

In films about my case studies they take the form of *metaphors*, such as the border fences of *A Song for Beko* and *Propaganda* that signify division of the Kurdish people; the family as in *Father* (Malyan, 1972) and *Curfew* (Masharawi, 1994) that constructs the nation as a collective individual demanding loyalty; a woman's body as in *Wedding in Galilee* representing the motherland that must be defended against invasion; pomegranate seeds (*Marooned in Iraq* (Ghobadi, 2002)), apples (*Nahapet* (Malyan, 1977)), and scattered beads (*Tale of Three Jewels* (Khleifi, 1994)) that stand for the fragility and instability of the nation in the face of dispersal; and the "empty land", used by several Israeli film-makers to counterfeit the absence of indigenous Palestinian inhabitants.

They also appear in the form of *key scenarios*, including the Palestinian wedding rituals of *Wedding in Galilee* and *Rana's Wedding* (Abu-Assad, 2002) that try to make sense of existence in the shadow of Israeli occupation; border crossings as in *A Time for Drunken Horses* and *A Song for Beko* that show resistance to the physical division of the nation; and the transition across a threshold in *Nahapet* and *Next of Kin* that mark the action of crossing the cultural boundary of the nation.

My study of the cinematic construction of national identity includes detailed examination of such symbols and the narratives and forms characteristic of oppositional film-makers that I touched on earlier. But, now, as a way of introducing my analysis of films in the subsequent chapters, I want to anticipate some of the themes that have emerged.

## **Themes of a nation**

In Chapter 1, I introduced my organising principle for this investigation as being "cinema regarding nations", and discussed Hjort's view that for a film to be counted as being *about* a nation it has to be explicitly thematised. While I agree with her premise that a national theme needs to be purposeful and not just part of a film-maker's attempt at realism, I argue that less obvious themes also play an important part in defining national identity and should be included in any analysis. Thus, the films I selected for my research exhibit one or more national themes, both overt and veiled, as revealed through their use of particular narratives, symbols, and forms.

Here, I set out very briefly the more important of these themes, ranging from those such as geography, culture, and social structures, with “objective” attributes, through to “subjective” ones that express the consciousness of belonging to a specific nation.

### ***Territorialising the nation***

Among the objective elements of national identity, territory is one of the most important. Smith, for example considers that its role is critical to the formation of nations: ‘nationalism always involves an assertion of, or struggle for, control of land ... a landless nation is a contradiction in terms’ (1999:149). Given its significance, how, then, is national territory characterised?

First is the notion of territory as a homeland. As Kaiser points out, the homeland is usually presented as something ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’, and the nation is depicted as rooted to a distinct place by means of images, myths, and symbols (2002:230-1). This homeland is defined by maps and borders, and by names given to distinctive features, such as rivers, villages, mountains, and border posts. For my stateless nations, maps and borders are something to be challenged for a homeland to be claimed and identity to be asserted. Thus border crossing is a frequent trope in these films.

Secondly, the homeland is usually represented by specific, symbolic landscapes in which stories of the nation unfold. These national landscapes not only try to promote love of the land through their intrinsic beauty, they also attempt to differentiate the homeland from that of other nations. The placement of monuments (statues, ruined temples, mosques, and commemorative sites, for example) and flags within a landscape associates territory with a particular nation, helping, as Kaiser maintains, ‘to project an image of permanence onto the nation and its relationship to the land’ (ibid.:235). Thus, landscape is more than a natural setting; it plays an active part in asserting national identity.

Finally, the homeland is routinely gendered; personified in motherland figures that constitute the land as a fecund source of the national family,<sup>11</sup> or in fatherland images that lay active claim to territory (ibid.). Love of the land is displaced onto the

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<sup>11</sup> See for example the discussion of the way women are imaged in Palestinian national discourse in (Sherwell, 2003a), and Lina Khatib’s more specific studies of women in Egyptian and Palestinian film (2004; 2006:91-5).

female body – something that is to be protected against violation – and, as Gilroy argues, ‘[t]he integrity of the nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity’ (2002:333). However, loss of land fundamentally changes the nationalist discourse in two major ways. As we shall see, it engenders symptoms of emasculation that, in some cases shifts responsibility for protecting the nation from adult males to women and children. And it creates an intensification of desire for the lost object and for return. Like the dream woman described by de Lauretis, the homeland is fetishised as the ‘ultimate unattainable goal’ (1984:13).

### ***Nationalising culture***

Culture is intrinsically bound up with the nation, it is ‘an entity associated with place and owned by a people’ (Wilson, 1998). Each culture is constructed in opposition to other cultures, allowing a nation to see itself as unique and enduring. But, how is a culture nationalised? How is it differentiated from other cultures?

The first, and often most powerful element is language (and in many cases the script in which it is written). Though in each of my cases language is problematic in practice, it remains a fundamental part of national identity, and makes its mark in film as dialogue, in sub-titles, and in signs and symbols.

Nations habitually claim to have a distinct way of life: that is, unique traditions and ceremonies, costumes, artefacts, habitation, modes of sustaining the community, music, dance, and song. These feature as important parts of the culture and, though often neglected, rarely exclusive, and losing much of their power in the modern world, they remain deeply ingrained as markers of identity.

Diverse social structures are encountered in my cases – nomads, settled farmers, traders, city dwellers, tribes, and patriarchal families. Again, though these are not unique they are regularly cited as differentiators that identify a nation. These structures are also explored as part of a continuing dialectic between modernity and tradition, where modernity is seen as a movement towards a brighter, more progressive and enlightened future, and archaic social structures are seen as inhibiting the development of the nation.

Religion is a major element of the identity of these nations. Notoriously a difficult subject to address in film (Wright, 2007:11-32), and circumscribed by taboos,

it nonetheless makes significant (if sometimes subdued) contributions to the representation in film of each nation's culture.

How culture is differentiated from one nation to another determines the cultural boundaries of the nation. Nationalists attempt to reinforce such cultural boundaries by a variety of means – cleansing the language, institutionalising music, or reifying traditions – to enclose the nation. They try to separate it from the Other and to preserve its integrity. Attempted transitions across boundaries are thus common themes of my cases and are often positioned as insurmountable or as a betrayal of the nation.

### ***Politicising the nation***

At the subjective end of the spectrum of national attributes is the development of political consciousness – a sense of belonging to a specific nation. Earlier, I rehearsed some theories of how a national community develops consciousness and showed that, for my case studies, the political space available for the expression of national identity has been severely limited. I would argue that film provides a significant means for such space to be “separated out” of the dense mesh of competing national discourses.

Here, I would like to make a distinction between “place” which is a physical location and “space” which is a collection of places linked together within and across societies. In contrast to the way an impression of geographical space is created in the cinema through editing, political space is constructed from *special places*, something Tuan characterises as ‘centre[s] of felt value’ (1977:4). The latter, marked by moments of pause, such as held shots, stills, repetitions, or panoramas, emphasise the importance attached to those places for the protagonist or film-maker. Movement between these special places – in the migratory journeys so common for Kurds, the putative journeys of Palestinians frustrated by roadblocks and checkpoints, the Armenian journeys of return – stitches them into a political space characteristic of each nation.

However, the struggle by stateless nations to create political space leaves little room for diversity, and the expression of national identity in film tends to be homogenised, representing only one section of society, most often the males who exercise patriarchal power. Thus, as Alison Butler points out, for women in many

societies ‘the sense of belonging [to the nation] is usually mediated via a familial imaginary’ (2002:91). Gender issues, specifically, are ‘relegated to the bottom of the agenda, a detail to be addressed after the more pressing issue of establishing the nation’ (ibid.:100). However, as I illustrate in my examples, some male film-makers, such as Henryk Malyan (see Chapter 3) and Michel Khleifi (see Chapter 8) attempt to expose these deficiencies though their efforts are sometimes ambiguous. And some female film-makers, such as Tina Bastajian and Gariné Torossian (see Chapter 4) and Mona Hatoum and Annemarie Jacir (see Chapter 8), not only engage strongly with resistance to the erasure of the nation but also challenge the homogenised view of their national identity.

### ***Sustaining the nation***

Renan’s concept of the nation can be summarised by saying that ‘national memory is at the heart of national identity’. And, earlier, I referred to Billig’s notion of the way states remind citizens of their nationality on a daily basis. They sustain the national memory through banal symbols and rituals that may go unnoticed. But what is this national memory?

Appiah suggests that it is a fund of stories held in common for a people and which function to articulate the nation (2003). Referred to as collective memory, these stories are rarely objective facts – they are re-created through various means to suit a particular purpose and a particular historical context – yet they frequently are the foundation of the identity of nations. All nations, especially if they are denied a state, need to be narrated in order to survive. And they need to go on being narrated, for, as Edward Said remarks with respect to the Palestinians, ‘there seems to be nothing in the world which sustains the story; unless you go on telling it, it will just drop and disappear’ (1995a:118). Thus, a repertoire of stories and myths is an essential element of sustaining the nation. George Schöpflin’s taxonomy of myths (1997:28-35) includes many that regularly appear in my case studies: for example, *myths of redemption and suffering* as in the Kurdish film *A Song for Beko*; *myths of unjust treatment* in the Palestinian film *Palestine - A People’s Record* (Al-Zobaidi, 1984); and *myths of foundation* in the Armenian film *Where Are My People?* (Hagopian, 1967).

Finally, each of my three nations suffers a sense of powerlessness which is a concomitant problem of statelessness. They are each subject to the will of other

states. Thus, power relationships between these nations and their host states is a prominent theme in these films, expressed mostly through active resistance in the form of physical conflict, but also through passive resistance that appears as a refusal to be forgotten or erased.



Key symbols, national narratives, and oppositional cinematic forms, all contribute to the expression of these themes of the nation. In the following chapters I have adopted a generally chronological approach to my analyses of film about each of the cases which enables me to associate the process of forming and sustaining each nation to its historical, social and political context. But, by also comparing and contrasting the way that national themes are handled, I am able to address the research questions I laid out in Chapter 1: What are the differences and commonalities between different representations of each nation? Can these be related to their different social and political contexts? And, can they be related to the historical process of formation and maintenance of each nation?