Chapter 9
Conclusion: Re-imagining National Identity in the Cinema

Flags, waved and unwaved, have been a theme of this study, and I have shown through a number of cinematic examples how they contribute to the range of visual images that enable a community to "imagine" itself as a nation. But, as Renan points out, a nation's existence is dependent on 'a daily plebiscite' (1996:41-2), that is, it must constantly be "re-imagined". This is particularly true for stateless nations and their diasporas whose cultural boundaries must repeatedly be reinforced against erosion for their survival to be guaranteed.

While film may not play a *central* role in the construction of national identity, a starting point of this thesis is that cinema is, nonetheless, an important site for re-imagining and re-presenting such communities. That this is so may be understood not only from my analysis of a range of films about these nations, but also from the discussion of extreme measures taken by various states to control the production and distribution of their cinematic narratives. As we have seen, censorship of film in Soviet Armenia, with varying degrees of success, suppressed expressions of Armenian identity. In a similar fashion, the Turkish government has resolutely tried to deny the existence of its large Kurdish population. And overwhelmingly negative Israeli and Hollywood propaganda films have restricted the development of a Palestinian narrative.

Thus, my focus has been on film and film-makers who take the nation as a principal theme. I argued in Chapter 1 that the concept of "national cinema", which has been seen as 'somehow reflective of a certain national spirit' (Alexander, 2001), is limited as a means of categorising film with respect to stateless nations and diasporas. And I put forward an alternative framework which groups together films about different nations, regardless of where they originate, into a "cinema regarding nations". The aim was to test assumptions that an analysis of various cases would show significant differences in the way in which nations are depicted that would not only reflect their diverse historical origins, but also indicate how they have sustained a distinct identity over time.

The selection of cases was governed by a further assumption that there would be differences in the re-imagination of identity between, on the one hand, "ancient"

nations with deep historical roots and, on the other, nations with more modern origins. In order to span these two extremes, I settled on three communities that share a number of common features and yet provide a spectrum of experience that supports a meaningful comparative study. Throughout the body of this thesis, observations have therefore been related to the theories of nation formation outlined in Chapter 2. I would argue that this provides a valuable continuation of academic studies of the relationship between 'the imagery of cinema […] and the interpretations of national identity' (Smith, 2000:57) that have surfaced in recent years.

In choosing to include a wide range of film and film-makers, I was conscious of the problem of dilution – that many of the examples could only be treated relatively superficially. In justification, I return to the issue of the "outsider position" with respect to foreign cultures. The approach, using a large body of works, has been to locate elements – symbols, formal methods, and narratives – that are repeated in several films; that appear in different contexts; and that are elaborated in different ways. This has then allowed for a focus on a much smaller number of key films and film-makers that provide the necessary detail for a credible comparison.

This analysis of film has been guided by the central questions set out in Chapter 1, which are used as the overall structuring device for the remainder of this chapter:

> What differences and commonalities are there in the representation of each nation?
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> Can differences between the representations of the nations be related to their different social and political contexts?
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> Can the representations be related to the historical process of formation and maintenance of a distinctive identity?

What are the differences?

Though there are common motives among many of the film-makers selected (oppositional and socially committed) and common circumstances (exilic and liminal), different approaches are evident *within the cases* towards the representation of identity.

The main divide in Armenian film is between a line of Moscow-trained film-makers who evoke identity through the traditions and way of life of, mainly, rural Armenian communities, and the diaspora where the ancient history of the people, their myths of foundation, and their unique language and religion predominate. Despite the unifying force of the genocide, this tension between representations of identity in the

homeland and the diaspora reflects continuing fissures within the Armenian community. The divide in the Kurdish case is between film-makers, such as Ariç and Ghobadi who try to represent the nation as unified, and those such as Güney and Saleem more concerned with the articulation of a separate Kurdish identity within the respective "host" states. Palestinian stories of oppression have a different emphasis not only in the different spaces that Palestinians occupy but also at different points in their recent history. This is evident in the contrast between Khleifi's subjects who show a deep humanity within their community, Suleiman's subjects who seem isolated and almost de-humanised by the frustrations of their confinement, and Masharawi's subjects who have descended slowly into despair in the refugee camps.

These contrasts highlight tensions between different sectors of the respective societies and remind us that identity cannot be assumed to be singular, cohesive, or stable over time.

What are the commonalities?

However, there are also instances of coherence in the representations of each nation that, without essentialising, might be understood as "defining" them.

In Soviet Armenia I suggested that cinema was instrumental in the survival of Armenian identity in the Soviet Union, and similarly, that diasporan film, with its focus on the genocide, played an important part in maintaining cohesion among the scattered Armenian people. In this respect, Armenian film could be thought of as representing a "community of memory" based on a homeland (both real and remembered), a shared history, and a common culture (both actual in Armenia and symbolic in the diaspora). In the Kurdish case, division of the people remains as strong as ever. However, various film-makers have been responsible for articulating a "virtual nation" based on cultural similarities between different communities, and the mythical homeland of a unified Kurdistan. Palestinian film provides ample evidence that Palestinians have a powerful sense of national identity, closely associated with their land. Despite the different forms this identity takes in the different fragments of the nation, it is overwhelmingly characterised by resistance and steadfastness.

These commonalities across a range of film-makers offer valuable insights into the wider social and political circumstances of these communities that will now be examined.

Can differences be related to the context?

The framework set out in Chapter 2, anticipated major national themes that would emerge from detailed analysis of film in each of the cases. Though research of this nature does not always produce results that fit neatly into such a categorisation – there may be overlaps, ambiguities, or contradictions – I have retained this framework for its usefulness for comparing and contrasting the cases.

Territory

Territory is vital in defining nations, but the relationship of these nations to the land is expressed in different ways because of their historical and current hold on particular territories.

The homeland carries strong historical associations for Armenians. It is shown in Soviet Armenian film as primordial (*The Beginning*), the site of ancient battles (*Davit-Bek*), the home of poets and scholars (*The Colour of Pomegranates*), the "cradle" of the ancient nation (*A Lonely Nut Tree*), and almost universally as a sacred place – the symbol of Mt. Ararat signifying the origin of the Armenian Church. The notional homeland of Kurdistan also carries mystical significance as the home of the poet Khani, expressed indirectly in *Sürü* and then more explicitly in *Dava*, and, again, is regarded as a cradle. But here, it is not the cradle of an ancient civilization, rather it is an idyllic "protective" space marked out by mountains (*A Song for Beko*). Palestinians have a more pragmatic association with the land – it is personal and directly experienced – and Palestinians appear as an organic part of their homeland (*Tale of Three Jewels*).

Territory is defined by maps and borders, and the journeys that link parts of the territory together. In Soviet Armenia, at first there could only be subdued references to the river boundary with the former lands in Turkey – for example, crossing the Araxes in *What's All the Noise of the River About* and *Nahapet*. Later, with the collapse of the communist regime, Dovlatyan could be more explicit in *Yearning*, yet throughout, there is little sense of a divided territory. By contrast, the dividing borders are ever-present in Kurdish film (*Propaganda*, *Marooned in Iraq*, *Kilometre Zero*). Journeys across these borders are used first of all to link the territory and then, in *A Song for Beko* and *Yol*, where places are named and mapped, the journey may be interpreted as an attempt to construct a "virtual" Kurdistan out of its pieces. Palestinians are also dominated by barbed wire, road blocks, and the

iniquitous Wall. But as well as being divided, they are confined into ghettoes, as illustrated by the frustrated journeys of, for example, *Rana's Wedding* and *Security Leak* (al-Faqih, 2006). There is a morbid sense of being ineluctably squeezed out – their lands reduced to a garden in *Canticle of the Stones*, and Jerusalem reduced to a shared courtyard in *Ticket to Jerusalem*.

Images of the homeland are produced through specific landscapes and monuments in an attempt to construct unified territory for each nation. In the Armenian case this is achieved through historic associations with territory – the ubiquitous Mt. Ararat, ancient churches, and memorials; for Kurds, it is the fortress of mountains and nurturing pastures; and for Palestinians, it is the rolling hills and stony villages of Palestine where the rights to territory (compared with Israelis) is signified by their deep love of the land.

Different expressions of territorial loss play an important role in differentiating the construction of national identity. Though, in the Armenian case, the former lands in Turkey are shown to be essential to the community's myth of origins and shared memories (*A Lonely Nut Tree* and *Yearning*), it is in the diaspora that the lost homeland is fetishised, for example by Michael Hagopian in a number of documentaries, and Tina Bogosian in *An Armenian Journey*. In *Calendar* and *Ararat*, Egoyan exposes what he regards as an unhealthy melancholia over this loss. With some exceptions, Kurds have not lost territory, but loss by division of Kurdistan is marked by the "damaged" burdens carried across borders in *A Time for Drunken Horses* and *Marooned in Iraq*, and into exile by Beko. For many Palestinians, the land carries little historical significance, being the site of endless defeats, but is idealised as a "lost paradise". Loss affects everyone – loss of home, villages, territory, farmland – and unlike the other two cases is a continuing and current process that affects both insiders and the diaspora.

The territory is gendered in all three cases (as in most nationalisms), though in subtly different ways. For Armenians, the land is associated with the figure of Mother Armenia who gives birth to the renewed nation (*Nahapet*); the mother who is unable to nurture her young (*Family Viewing*); the lost mother (*Ararat*); or the found mother (*Mayrig*). Kurdish films overwhelmingly suggest a "broken" nation through images of damaged women; women who have broken the taboos of society or the patriarchy; and women who have failed in their obligation to reproduce. Women figure much

more prominently in Palestinian film and seem to be expected to fulfil three roles: as mother of the nation, as active participant in the resistance struggle, and as the beloved – representing the lost lands of Palestine forever to be mourned over.

Culture

Culture is the second essential ingredient of national identity, and film-makers emphasise not only the unique elements of their culture but also how it differs from that of other nations. In film about Armenians, "high culture" predominates: the church and its archaic liturgy, its ruined and deserted temples, its memorial stones (*khachkars*), and its ancient books, poetry, and music. For the Kurds, it is folk music, song, and dance, the village, and old folk tales that are most evident. And for the Palestinians, again it is folk music, song, and dance, but above all, the house, the home, and the village, stand out.

The Armenian language, script, architecture, religion, and ancient history are unique to the nation and are used repeatedly in film, though sometimes they are challenged as markers of identity. However, in the diaspora, with the exception of Armenian-speaking enclaves, these are fetishised – elements that are revered as an intrinsic part of the nation but mainly in symbolic form. This is an irony that Egoyan skilfully explores in *Calendar* and *Ararat*. Language in the Kurdish case is a differentiator from other nations, though, because of its variations, it is not a unifying factor. It has been suppressed in each state and could not be used in films until after the 1980s, since when it has become the focus for resistance to the hegemonic power of the host states (*Hejar*, *Kilometre Zero*). None of these constituents of identity are unique in the Palestinian case, and with the exception of *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Measures of Distance*, where language is explored for its symbolic value, they are not prominent themes in Palestinian film.

For Armenians, collective memory is inextricably tied into myths of a historic past, lost homeland, and the concrete reality of genocide. We have seen how the historic past intrudes into much Armenian film; how the more recent loss of a homeland invokes deep nostalgia in the diaspora; and how a traumatic response to the genocide binds the nation together. But there is little sense of a common destiny between the homeland and the diaspora. With the exception of the often quoted fable of *Mem û Zîn*, there is scant evidence of historic memory in film about the Kurds. Rather, they appear to be bound up with the present and suggest an uncertain vision of

the future. And, while for the Palestinians there is intense nostalgia for the lands and villages lost in the 1948 and 1967 wars and the subsequent annexation of large sectors of Palestine, there is little in the way of historic memory reflected in film. But Palestinians assert their right to be remembered, their right to record their tenure of the land, and thus their vision of a united future (*Tale of Three Jewels*).

In each case, film-makers engage with the dialectic between modernity and tradition, where modernity is seen as a movement towards a brighter, more progressive and enlightened future. In Soviet Armenia, this is evident in criticism of the honour code and the influence of the patriarchy, for example in *Namous* and *Pepo*. In Kurdish film it appears indirectly in Güney's films (which also explore the paradox that modernity may involve break-down of social structures and the loss of identity); in Şavata's films about the persistence of tribal structures (*Dava*, *Sinir*); and in a number of films that deal with the unequal position of women in what remains a patriarchal society. Khleifi also provides a critique of the archaic social structures of Palestinian villagers in *Fertile Memory* and *Wedding in Galilee* in which he cites the problems of the Arab world in dealing with modernity. But, in general, Palestinian films represent a much more modern society than the other two cases.

Flags are used by states to impose identity on the nation. They are notable by their absence in film from Soviet Armenia, where the flag was banned. In the Kurdish case, we see how the state (particularly Turkey) uses flags (and slogans) in a banal form of nationalism to enforce its culture indirectly (*Propaganda*), and the importance of flags to the Kurds of Iraq (*Kilometre Zero*). However, in Palestinian film, flags are more actively used as weapons by both the Israelis and the Palestinians (*Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention*).

In Chapter 2, I distinguished between the physical or geographical borders of states and the cultural boundaries of nations. We have seen that borders and border crossing have different meanings for each of these nations, and we should expect their boundaries also to be distinct. Though some cultural markers are not exclusive and are losing relevance in the modern world (for example traditions are similar in each case, and modernity tends to dissolve difference), nonetheless differences are observable and these seem to be most felt in the Armenian diaspora and among the Kurds.

A number of Armenian diasporan films, for example, express fear and ambivalence towards assimilation – (*Pink Elephant*, *Chickpeas*, *After Freedom*, and *588 rue Paradis*). And Egoyan, in particular, deconstructs the problem of crossing the boundary between cultures (*Next of Kin*, *Family Viewing*), and challenges the nationalist need to preserve this difference in *Calendar*. For the Kurds, construction of identity is overlaid with the need to resist forced assimilation; they are identified by difference from their host states. Assimilation suggests a journey – across a boundary – from one identity to another, which is one reason for the prevalence of journeys in Kurdish film.

Constructing space

Cinema constructs spaces in which identity may be expressed, by linking together special places of "felt value". These spaces are politicised in my cases first of all with respect to a "colonising" power: the Soviet Union; Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq; and Israel. But national space is not homogenous. It is also politicised with respect to internal power structures – most often the patriarchy – and the relationship between the homeland and a diaspora. Analysis of the formal and other means by which space is represented in the cinema provides a further means of differentiating how each nation constructs its identity.

Relationship to the colonial power

In Soviet Armenia, though film-makers were largely constrained to the use of Moscow-inspired forms, space is created by subversive means: the river Araxes is the most obvious sign. This gradually led to an assertive ethnic identity that we may observe in the transition from the multiculturalism of *Pepo* to the nationalism of *Yearning*. Pelechian and Paradjanov were exceptions, defying Soviet influences to create unique visions of the nation through their radical re-evaluation of space and time.

Though there are few formal innovations in film about the Kurds, the arabesk – especially in Güney's work in the 1970s and then more widely (*Fotograf*, *Drejan*, and *Eskiya*) – directly challenge the Turkish state, creating a space in which Kurdish identity begins to be conveyed. In terms of narrative, the repeated trope of journeys across state borders and cultural boundaries also may be interpreted as an attempt to represent a unified nation in opposition to colonial division of the people.

In Palestinian film the realist documentary prevails, frequently portraying narratives of victimhood, misery, violence, and despair. However stylistic means, especially the fragmented, broken forms of Suleiman, also confront the world with the forced disintegration of the nation.

Relationship to internal power structures

As we have seen, the construction of national identity is consistently gendered in film about each of the three nations, and representations of the patriarchal structure as archaic are common. However, other issues also emerge as these social structures have fractured and as the diaspora assumes greater importance.

In Soviet Armenia, a few films touch on emasculation resulting from the genocide (*Nahapet, Dzori Miro*), however, the exploration of gender relations does not go much beyond this. In the diaspora there are echoes of this emasculation in the sexual difficulties explored in Egoyan's films. However, Egoyan and other film-makers also began to use experimental means (breaking up time and space, and highlighting cinematic processes themselves) to contest the way the nation has been re-imagined by Armenian nationalists.

In Kurdish film, though the patriarchy is subverted, for example, in *Yol* and *Sinir*, it is not seriously challenged even in contemporary film. The crisis of masculinity found in arabesk is more an expression of the problem for men in finding a role within a patriarchy that is breaking down.

The Palestinian case is the most complex of the three. Here, the "failure" of masculinity dominates, and women are frequently shown to be the mainstay of the nation. Throughout Khleifi's work; in Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Divine Intervention*; and in the work of a new generation of Palestinian film-makers (for example, Jacir, Abu-Assad, and Najjar), women not only challenge their "allotted" role in society, they actively resist oppression of the nation.

Can representations be related to the formation and maintenance of identity?

This research helps illuminate the central debate about the process of nation formation outlined in Chapter 2. Clearly, film is a recent invention and, as a means of mass communication, its role in re-imagining and re-presenting national identity fits with the modernist arguments of Deutsch, Anderson, and Gellner. However, the way

in which each nation is represented is, I argue, indicative of its origins. And, in the cinema, each nation has its own meta-narrative through which we can observe the processes by which it has reached its present condition.

Films about the Armenians emphasise the deep historical and cultural roots of the nation, a sense of continuity, then persecution, genocide, and trauma. In Soviet Armenia it becomes a question of re-affirming identity whenever an opportunity arises; in the diaspora, identity is sustained by continual allusions to the genocide and increasingly symbolic references to the cultural heritage and an unattainable homeland. Despite political and social cleavages between the communities, and the forces of assimilation, cinema re-imagines a nation that remains unified by a subjective feeling of being Armenian.

Kurdish films promote a myth of historical unity, then division of the nation, persecution, repression, economic disadvantage, and forced assimilation. There is increasing stress on cultural differences from their "hosts", cultural similarities among the different Kurdish communities, and the unity provided by the mountainous homeland of Kurdistan. In spite of the strong forces of assimilation in each state and in the diaspora, cinema re-imagines a collective identity that survives in the form of a "virtual nation".

Palestinian film stresses their status as victims of colonisation, the *Nakba*, betrayal by Arab states, the violent appropriation of their land by Israel, and betrayal by the world. Identity is centred on local traditions, strong links to the land, the justice of their cause, their collective will to resist erasure, and an increasingly illusory hope for return.

It is not unreasonable to argue, therefore, that films about these nations reflect the observations set out in Chapter 2. The Armenian case tends to support Smith's perspective that a strong genealogy (that is, common cultural roots and myths of origin) is essential to the formation and maintenance of a collective identity. In the Kurdish case the construction of a "virtual nation" is dependent more on their ability to communicate a sense of identity over a dispersed population than on a deep awareness of history. While this would seem to support the modernist view of nation formation, lack of cohesion among the Kurds could be attributed to their relatively weak genealogy, and thus would also provide evidence for the perennialist position.

The construction of a Palestinian identity separate from their Arab neighbours, and its persistence in the face of extreme pressure, would seem to be based on factors associated with modernity rather than on their cultural heritage.

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The analysis of cinema regarding the three case studies illustrates differences in the way these nations are re-imagined. Different treatments of territory and culture tell us about historical changes to the homeland; the contrast between the "reality" of the territory remaining for the nation as opposed to its "imaginary" or notional homeland; and the relationship to "host"/colonising cultures. Different ways in which political space is represented tell us about the coherence of the nation, that is, about the strength of its binding. And the set of representations show differences that may be related to the distinct historical processes of formation and maintenance of identity of each nation.

This thesis contains a certain tension. It is the tension between trying to find some coherence in the representations of each nation in the cinema while avoiding essentialising the identities of the different communities. The results from my examination of a wide range of film and film-makers point to the emergence of national identities that are multi-focal and multi-sited in each case. They also suggest that subjective factors (that is, those based on cultural roots) are insufficient on their own to bind a nation together. Other factors such as the existence of a homeland and extreme forms of persecution are equally important. The study shows that the contextual analysis of film could fruitfully be applied to investigations of the formation and survival of nations in further cases.