

# Armenia



1. Historical Armenia

Map 1: Armenia at different historical periods. (Hewsen, 2001:13)

### Chapter 3

## Looking Back From *Ararat* – Soviet Armenia

Surrounded by mountainous terrain, a ragged band of soldiers with ancient-looking rifles is ranged against superior well-armed forces. As shells explode and bodies are torn apart, the setting changes seamlessly to the courtyard of a hospital where American missionary, Dr. Clarence Ussher, is treating the wounded. The action continues with Ussher giving a letter appealing for help to the assembled children of the town in the hope that one of them will be able to deliver it to the outside world. The camera then pulls back to reveal the set and the film crew, as a “cut” is called. This sequence, which concerns the defence of Van in 1915,<sup>1</sup> is taken from the film *Ararat* directed by Canadian-Armenian Atom Egoyan.

The following scene joins the actor Charles Aznavour, playing the “director” of the film-within-the-film, in conversation with an art historian he has hired to give legitimacy to the screenplay. He claims that ‘everything you see here is based on what my mother told me’, but, as they walk out onto the balcony of the mission house, we see the painted flat of Mt. Ararat which is being used by the film-makers as a backdrop.



The conversation continues:

Historian: You wouldn't be able to see Mt. Ararat from Van  
Director: Well yes, but I felt it would be important

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Ottoman regime Van was a major city, capital of the district, with a population of about 25,000. The attack by Turkish troops in 1915 is regarded as signalling the beginning of the genocide.

Historian: But it's not true  
Director: It's true in spirit

The film's screenwriter, who appears a little later in the courtyard below, adds:

Screenwriter: We thought we could stretch things a bit – it's such an identifiable symbol

In these few scenes, Egoyan reveals his engagement with questions about the nature of historical narrative, the manipulation of powerful national symbols, and the fabrication of identity. He exposes how boundaries between peoples can be defined through unobtrusive editing; in this case by personalising the Armenian soldiers; constructing them as brave *resistance fighters* set against an anonymous, impersonal *other* – the Turkish soldiers. He shows how film can confer “authenticity”: Clarence Ussher's spotless white suit, despite all the bloodshed and carnage around him, suggests an “unimpeachable” witness; the claim of Aznavour's character to truthfulness is authenticated by knowledge that the actor's parents *did* flee Armenia in 1915. And, he reveals the extent to which a summarising symbol like Mt. Ararat can be used to evoke a history of persecution and devastation stretching from the mythical biblical Flood to the genocide.

Deliberately blurring the distinction between real events and their representation, Egoyan thus signals that this film is not so much a fictionalised account of the Armenian genocide, as an exploration of the way such history is, or could be, told. Furthermore, by shunning a straightforward historical narrative, he has tried to express in this film, the *spirit* of survival embedded in Armenian identity.

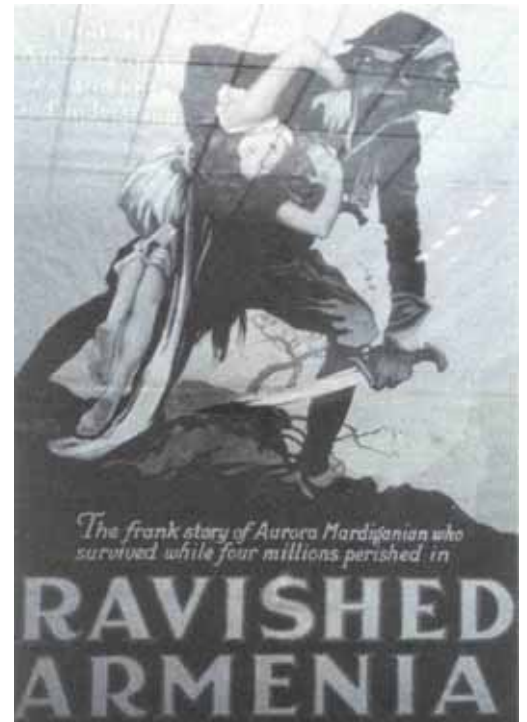
The deep trauma of the genocide, the corrosive effect of its suppression and denial on survivors and their descendants, together with the fragmentation of the nation, resulted in political and cultural cleavages between Soviet Armenia and the diaspora. With the loss of so many people, much of their historic territory, and some of their centres of spiritual and intellectual life, Armenians had to struggle to maintain and assert an identity that, after 1921, developed separately. Those in Soviet Armenia were sometimes encouraged to assert their cultural distinctiveness and sometimes discouraged from doing so, while those in the diaspora were faced with dilution of their identity through assimilation into the respective host cultures. I will return to Egoyan's *Ararat* in the next chapter where I consider the part played by diasporan cinema in the general discourse on Armenian identity. But first, I want to examine how cinema reveals the difficulty experienced by Soviet Armenians both in

responding to the genocide and in steering a path between “being Armenian” and becoming citizens of a Republic of the Soviet Union.

## The road to genocide

*Ararat* looks back to 1915, just after the first film studios were established in the urban centres of Tbilisi (Georgia) and Baku (Azerbaijan) and a number of cinemas opened in the territory of present-day Armenia.<sup>2</sup> Several film-makers had been active in the Caucasus for some time by then, however they gave almost no attention to the pogroms and massacres that were taking place in the region between 1894-1909 (Hovannisian, 2004:chapter 7). An exception was a Russian feature film *Under the Kurdish Yoke* (Minervine, 1915) which was the first to touch on the subject of the plight of the Armenians (Zakoïan, 1993b:121). Fragments of the film, preserved in the Armenian Film Archive in Yerevan, contain sequences that explicitly denote the rape and massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turkish and Kurdish soldiers. However the film was never distributed, apparently because of the sensitivity of Russian-Ottoman relations at the time (Zakoïan, 2005).

Similarly absent was any sustained treatment of the culmination of Turkish action against Armenians: the genocide of 1915-23. A few early Russian films, shot in studios close to Moscow, are said to ‘evoke the genocide’ (Radvanyi, 1993a:47), and a Hollywood film called *Ravished Armenia* (Apfel), released in 1919, makes it the central subject. The latter, based on the autobiographical story of a survivor, Aurora Mardiganian, appears to have been designed to take advantage of widespread Western anti-Muslim sentiment. Despite its apparently sensational rendering of events, critical and media opinion in the US and UK was generally supportive of its effect in bringing the genocide to public



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<sup>2</sup> Zakoïan dates the opening of the first cinemas to 1909 (interview in Yerevan, April 2005).

attention in the West (*ibid.*:13-15).<sup>3</sup>

If, as Razmik Panossian asserts, the genocide remains ‘the key to understanding Armenian identity in the twentieth century’ (2000:218), the absence of a measured cinematic response to it in Soviet Armenia is notable. One factor accountable for this was the general cultural trauma which also affected writers, artists, and poets in the immediate aftermath, and rendered it too difficult an event for film-makers to confront. Other factors at this time undoubtedly were Soviet control over film production, and censorship which suppressed references to Turkish atrocities and to the existence of Armenian territories other than those of Soviet Armenia. Yet, a number of film-makers were able to engage indirectly with the discourse on identity and to make films regarding the Armenian nation. For example, Hamo Bek-Nazarov and Henryk Malyan reflect, in different ways, a vibrant Armenian way of life while grappling with the drive to modernity as a socialist republic, while Frunze Dovlatyan addresses more overtly nationalist themes. And two figures, Artavazd Pelechian with his alternative, poetic forms, and Sergei Paradjanov who puts himself in the position of a traditional storyteller, stand apart – their evocation of Armenian identity directly challenging Soviet authority. As we shall see, film-makers also found ways to allude to the genocide, especially after the 1960s, though this catastrophe for the nation has been treated only patchily in both Soviet Armenia and in the diaspora.

## **Soviet Armenia**

By 1921 much of the Armenian engagement with modernity over the previous century had been shattered by massacres, war, migration, genocide, and civil war. The population remaining in what became Soviet Armenia was predominantly homogenous and predominantly rural,<sup>4</sup> and though an intellectual urban elite revived, in part as a result of immigration, patriarchal social structures controlled large sections of Armenian life.

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<sup>3</sup> All prints have apparently been lost, but Anthony Slide has reproduced the original autobiography with details of its production, screenplay and reception (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Panossian estimates that by 1921, 150,000 Armenians were left in Turkey, about half a million in other parts of the USSR, and half a million in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. One million Armenians lived in Soviet Armenia, of whom less than 20% were urbanised (2000).

A new era of Armenian history began, which Suny divides into three phases: 1921-28, when a mixed economy and ‘fairly tolerant political practices’ were accommodated; 1928-53, the totalitarian Stalinist period of ‘radical socioeconomic transformation’; and the post-Stalin period, ‘marked by a relaxation of total state control and a more moderate pattern of social change’ (1993a:136).

Cinema in Armenia broadly reflects these changes of political mood under Soviet control. The silent period from 1923-35 was associated with a general “cultural renaissance” during which some freedom of expression was permitted. Under Stalin, censorship increased, and from 1935 there was a dramatic decline in film production. The post-Stalin “thaw” that started in 1956 witnessed the emergence of a “new wave” of film directors who were able to tackle sensitive issues once again. In each period, film-makers never strayed far from the conventions of their time. In common with cinema elsewhere, the early silent melodramas mostly derive from the theatre; Soviet influence is apparent in the dramatic reconstruction of documentary events and the emphasis on realism; and the early sound films are deeply expressionist in form. After WWII, the work of Malyan and Dovlatyan owes something to contemporaneous neo-realist movements in world cinema, even though their development was restricted by the demands of Soviet inspired Socialist Realism.

Given such shifts in Soviet colonial practices, how did film-makers in these different periods sustain Armenian identity? How did they resist the hegemony of Russian culture?

### ***Cultural renaissance (1923-35)***

During the 1920s, the Communist leadership sought to modernise Armenian society: to weaken family and village ties; to encourage greater equality between the sexes; and to reduce the influence of the church and ancient customs (Matossian, 1962:59-60). But the traditional family remained ‘one of the greatest potential foci for conservative resistance to the new Communist regime’ (ibid.:63). And the church, though it had already lost much of its influence in Armenian intellectual society, was still enormously popular among the peasant population (ibid.:90-95). In part to overcome such resistance and to bring modern ideology to the villages, state cultural institutions were established, including a national broadcasting company and a film

studio, set up in the capital Yerevan in 1923.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet leadership, recognising the importance of film in bringing the communist message to the people,<sup>6</sup> installed cinemas – both fixed and mobile – in rural communities (Kepley, 1996).

Film-making in Armenia was always under the patronage of the Soviet state, and it is scarcely surprising that at least half of the documentary films produced between 1923 and 1935 are dedicated to praising the achievements of communism in modernising the country. A survey of the catalogues produced by the AAFCJ,<sup>7</sup> reveals nine on agricultural achievements; three on the economy and culture; five on industrial successes; two on advances in science; and two on education and the elimination of illiteracy. Similarly, about a quarter of the feature films made over this period recount stories of the victory of Bolshevism and the benefits it brought to the country (Gulyan, 2001).

However, modernisation went hand in hand with re-nationalisation. While Soviet protection fixed the borders of the new republic and influenced a general Westernisation of dress and secularisation of education, at the same time there was an attempt to revitalise the national culture. Lenin's 'nativisation' policy (*korenizatsiia*) encouraged use of the Armenian language and supported national literature, music, arts, and folk dancing (Matossian, 1962:62). As Suny notes, the expectation seemed to be that 'Armenians could change traditional ways into modern ways, yet remain Armenian' or become 'even more Armenian' (1993a:142). The newly established institutions not only served as propaganda outlets but also as a means of reaffirming the Armenian language and culture. Film-makers were encouraged, therefore, also to make documentary and feature films that celebrated famous national cultural figures such as composers and actors.

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<sup>5</sup> Initially called Gosfotokino of Armenia (1923), the studio was renamed Armenkino or Haykino (1924), Yerevan Studio (1938) and Armenfilm or Haifilm (1957) (Ovanessian, 1995:451).

<sup>6</sup> Lenin famously stated, 'of all the arts for us the most important is cinema', and Stalin believed cinema to be 'the most important means of mass agitation' (Bayadyan, 2002:4).

<sup>7</sup> The Armenian Association of Film Critics and Journalists. Their catalogues are also published on the internet at <http://www.arm-cinema.am/>

### *Tradition and modernity*

These conflicting influences are evident in the work of the most prominent early Armenian film-maker, Hamo Bek-Nazarov. For his first film, *Namous* (1925), Bek-Nazarov drew on a text by novelist and playwright Aleksandr Shirvanzade.

Set in the 1890s, the melodrama concerns two families whose lives are devastated by an unspecified disaster. In an extended opening sequence, the baby Susanna is rescued from the surrounding chaos and rubble of a town. She is the 'gift from God', implicitly associated with the Armenian nation saved from destruction. In gratitude, Susanna's father pledges her in marriage to Seyran, the son of his friend.

As the young couple grows up, Seyran's impetuosity drives him to meet Susanna alone before they are married. Her traditionalist father, obsessed with honour, breaks his pledge and marries Susanna off to another man, Rustam. Seyran in a fit of jealous rage, declares that he has already been intimate with Susanna. Rustam kills Susanna to save his own honour when he sees "proof" of her infidelity. Seyran, too late to undo his harm, kills himself when he realises what he has done. Honour must be preserved at all costs: the honour of Susanna's family, disrupted by Seyran; the honour of Rustam which must be avenged; and the honour of Seyran who must kill himself.

Feminist scholars are rightly critical of early silent cinema's betrayal of modernity, especially its frequent use of theatrical melodrama and the positioning of women as objects of the male gaze (Butler, 2002:7). Certainly, Bek-Nazarov is not immune from this criticism, yet in this film he develops a critique of the restrictive and often harsh nature of this archetypal community. In particular, Susanna is represented as a passive victim of the violence of her father, the impetuosity of Seyran and the revenge of Rustam. Her head usually bowed in submission, gaze averted, she appears incapable of action. Her frightened movements and deep-set eyes express terror or melancholy. She is literally walled in to the family home to prevent Seyran reaching her again, and, once she is married, she is taken off to be "guarded" by Rustam's mother. Susanna, subservient first to father and then to husband, embodies the confinement of women.

Seyran is one aspect of the romantic male hero: lithe, active, impulsive, and wild. Often shown in profile, hair tousled, and half shadowed, his broad, sweeping gestures seemingly show him wrought by unfulfilled passion. Seyran appears to fight



against tradition, but it is his actions that cause the death of Susanna. Rustam, the other hero, is upright and honest. Usually seen well-lit in full face, his movements are slow, stolid, and deliberate, speaking of integrity. Yet it is he who kills Susanna to preserve his own honour.



*Seyran*



*Susanna*



*Rustam*

The call to modernise embedded in Bek-Nazarov's criticism of patriarchy and the destructive male honour code, is, however, tempered by the enormous life and vitality of this community expressed through comic sequences and in the wedding scenes, dancing, and folk music.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary Armenian audiences (and also many present day spectators) responded positively to these enactments of traditional ceremonies. The Russian view of the film, as reported by *Pravda*, was harsher. Noting that Armenian spectators were delighted and charmed by the 'exact representation of the near past', it questioned the lack of criticism of these 'outdated and destructive customs'.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Bek-Nazarov reveals the ambivalence of a people coming to terms with the loss of their momentary freedom and independence, finding themselves once again under colonial rule. Susanna expresses this in a vision where her two lovers appear, one either side of her – Rustam the traditionalist and Seyran the young man fighting against the restrictions of the old ways.

Such duality was further compounded by the legacy of tsarist colonial attitudes in communist Russia that continued to assert a hierarchy of cultures in which the Eastern, predominantly Muslim, peoples were placed at the bottom. As Michael Smith argues, Soviet film-makers reflected their 'condescending ethnic prejudices' in films made about the minority republics, stereotyping Easterners not merely as backward and uncivilised but also as exotic (1997:647).

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<sup>8</sup> Though this is a silent film, the form of the music is evident in the instruments being played and the rhythm of the dances. On the video version, the dubbed music almost certainly reflects the type of musical accompaniment at the film's original showing (Bakhchinyan, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The comments by the *Pravda*, critic, B.M., dated 9<sup>th</sup> November 1926, are reported in Zakoïan (1993b:122).

Christian Armenia was partially exempt from this anti-Islamic, “orientalist”, exoticism, as illustrated by the realism of *Namous*. With its details of everyday life in the rural population, from the sequences of baking of bread, tea drinking, game playing, and gossiping in the streets, to the lengthy tavern and wedding scenes, it was regarded as depicting ‘the East without make-up’



(Zakořian, 1993c:64). However, in associating the passive figure of Susanna with the Armenian nation, always acted upon and never taking action to change her situation, Bek-Nazarov, perhaps inadvertently, reinforces ethnic prejudices and sexual stereotypes. Indeed, other contemporary Russian newspaper reports, while acknowledging the ‘clarity’ (that is, the realism) of the film, still focus on its depiction of ‘the inner world of the Orient’ and its ‘ethnic subject matter’ (Pilikian, 1981:41).

### *Patriarchy and power*

This initial phase of cinema in Soviet Armenia is reasonably prolific for such a small population and includes historical dramas, civil war films, and comedies. Many of these exhibit similar themes of doubling and choice that seem to express the search for an identity, torn between the future as a modern Soviet Republic and the rich set of Armenian national traditions and characteristics. It is rounded off by the first narrative sound film, *Pepo* (Bek-Nazarov, 1935). Based on a play of the same name by Gabriel Sundukian, the film is set in the vigorous Armenian community of 1870s Tbilisi. The plot relates the story of Pepo, a poor fisherman, cheated by an unscrupulous money-lender of the dowry he has saved to ensure the marriage of his sister, Kekel. But, by superimposing the opening and closing titles on an image of Mt. Ararat (not visible from Tbilisi) Bek-Nazarov, like Egoyan in *Ararat*, seeks to generalise the story. He extends Sundukian’s play, essentially a class critique, into an indictment of the repression of women in Armenian society, and, I would argue, the subjugation of the Armenian people as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Parlakian (2001) for the script of the play *Pepo* and for notes on the author.



The film packs the town with a lively, open and fun-loving peasant population. Their work-songs, market cries, and street songs fill the air. Bek-Nazarov, by his framing of the crowd scenes, the fluid movement and gestures of the characters, traditional costumes and dancing, broad humour,

“spontaneous” love songs, and the use of a static camera, emphasises the solidity and authenticity of these ordinary folk.

Pepo, though ostensibly the hero, is frequently de-centred in the frame, reduced in scale (especially in the opening shots), and often given the same weight as his friend, Kakuli. Even his last speech, which censures the perniciousness of capitalism, is partially obscured by prison bars. And the film closes, not with Pepo’s speech, but with a rousing “peasant chorus”. Pepo is scarcely individualised, he is Everyman, a representative of the working people.



By contrast, Bek-Nazarov shows the bourgeoisie to be false and corrupt. Zimzimov, the money-lender, is treated expressionistically: his huge shadow hovers over images of the main characters in the title sequence; he vainly rehearses before a mirror the praise given to him by a state official; his massive shape,

cloaked in black, lumbers through the crowd in the market; and, when he is denounced at the end of the film, his shadow, now reduced, is cast on the ground. Shadows and reflections designate his dishonesty and unreliability.

The merchant Darcho, who is initially betrothed to Kekel, is handled more lightly. Though also venal and corrupt, he is the comic counterpart to Zimzimov. He adopts European costume and manners in company and rejects “peasant” Armenian

dancing. He even employs a French dancing master to teach him the steps but falls over when he tries out the polka.

Bek-Nazarov was hampered by the censors who at this time wanted to reinforce the notion of happy interaction among the peoples of the Caucasus within the Union and also to demonstrate that the corrupt merchant class had been eliminated. Accordingly, he tends to reinforce stereotypes of vigorous peasants set in opposition to an effete bourgeoisie that has pretensions to foreign sophistication, and conspiratorial and untrustworthy merchants and money-lenders. However, by establishing the merry peasants as comprehensive winners of the class war, Bek-Nazarov made space in which to situate Kekel, in a number of key scenes significantly absent from the play, as an elaborating symbol of Armenian society.

First, at the market which she is permitted to visit but where, as an unmarried woman, she is not allowed to speak, she is positioned alongside silks and satins as one of the goods on display. She is openly appraised by possible suitors and the town gossips discuss the value of her dowry. Then, in a scene set in a communal women's bath-house, the importance of which is emphasised by the repeated but thwarted attempts of a young male voyeur to watch, Kekel is revealed naked. As in Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee*, the purified body of a woman, emerging from the rituals of cleansing, is surely meant as a representation of the nation (see Chapter 7). But here, the extent of the female body as a commodity is underscored by the women who surround Kekel, repeatedly, sensuously, stroking her face and remarking on the beauty of her body. A mournful close-up is followed by a point-of-view shot in which her victimisation is expressed in her gaze, sweeping rapidly around the full circle of watching women. While openly criticising the commodification of women in this society, Bek-Nazarov thus relates it to the repression of the Armenian nation.

A sequence at a cathedral service follows, where a series of shots, composed to emphasise the soaring spaces, heavily robed priests, incense clouds, and the singing of the liturgy, infuse the scene with Armenian national and religious symbolism. Specific framing and editing – a close-up showing her as a supplicant, hands raised to God, followed immediately by a point-of-view shot of a “bride” in front of a portrait of the Madonna and child – closely link Kekel to the Christian iconography of birth and crucifixion. But then news arrives that Darcho has jilted her in favour of a richer woman. In a second view of the portrait, the bride is now ominously absent, an

indicator of Kekel’s terrible loss – her future is destroyed. Here, Bek-Nazarov indicates the failure of the church to provide comfort for her personal catastrophe. A long, close-up tracking shot, the only one in the film, follows Kekel as she slowly leaves the cathedral. The service continues, uncaring, while the congregation gossips. Once outside, another point-of-view shot, this time a panorama of the town, reinforces her helplessness. If we accept Kekel is a representative of the nation, Bek-Nazarov seems not only to reflect on her individual repression – on her lack of choice in the matter of her body being used as an object of trade – but he also seems to hint at the nation’s lack of self-determination under colonial rule.



*Kekel and the portrait of the Madonna*

### *Symbols of Armenian identity*

In this earliest sound film, Bek-Nazarov brings together several key symbols of Armenian identity: language, traditional music and song, costume, ceremony and dancing, and religion. The spoken Armenian language makes its first appearance in the cinema,<sup>11</sup> and is set against the pretensions of some of the bourgeoisie to speak French or Russian. Scenes are linked together by Armenian church music, folk music, street sounds, popular songs of the “national” poet, Sayat Nova, and a specially composed anthem to accompany the final uprising of the peasants. As a

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<sup>11</sup> In contrast to films of this period from most of the other Republics, Armenian films were made or dubbed in Armenian (Smith, 1997:672).



consequence, Bek-Nazarov succeeded in creating a film that satisfied the demands of the Soviet censors, yet was truly popular among the Armenian population not just as a melodrama, but as an expression of their historical identity.<sup>12</sup>

References to the lost lands and the ancient kingdom of Armenia, though muted, are also abundant. Consider the symbolism of the Armenkino logo (admittedly with Russian script), used extensively, and unique among the Soviet Republics in its nationalist content. Set in a mountainous landscape, it depicts a figure, holding a reel of film, the ends of which are curled around the twin peaks of Mt. Ararat, binding them into Armenia. The iconic double mountain, prominent in the opening and closing sequences of *Pepo*, makes regular appearances in films from this period.



After catastrophic events, such as the genocide, there is frequently a latency period during which time it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to cope with the resulting trauma. As Elsaesser argues, this often leads to the repression of memory of the events or a failure adequately to represent them (Elsaesser, 2001:195). Though *allusions* to the Armenian catastrophe are never entirely absent from films of this period, it is not directly referenced. For example, the opening sequence of *Namous*, evokes the genocide although it ostensibly refers to an earthquake. Furthermore, it is arguable that a general explanation for the prevalence of comedies during this period,<sup>13</sup> lies in their ability to relieve the trauma for survivors of devastation. The incoherence of slapstick comedy may be interpreted as a manifestation of repression – indicated by the loss of language. Such a loss, common in extreme forms of grief, is often sublimated in wordless lamentation.<sup>14</sup> These films seem to fulfil the role of expressing the deep emotions surrounding the nation’s suffering that could not be

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<sup>12</sup> Pilikian quotes favourable reviews of the film both from Armenian critics and the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* (1981:49-50).

<sup>13</sup> For example, *Shor and Shorshor* (Bek-Nazarov, 1927), *Kikos* (Barkhudaryan, 1931), and *Mexican Diplomats* (Martirossian, 1931).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Rubina Perroomian, who, following Lacan, notes the strong relationship between loss of language and lamentation (Perroomian, 1993:90-94).

articulated in any other way. The genocide and its aftermath may have been forbidden subjects for cinema in Armenia at this time, but they surely lurk beneath the surface. A similar effect may be seen in the films of Palestinians Elia Suleiman and Rashid Masharawi (see Chapter 8). In their case, however, silence and incoherence seem to derive from their extreme frustration over the difficulty of making their voices heard.

Overall, the period is characterised by uncertainty and division. The fledgling regime steadily consolidated its hold and demanded expressions of solidarity. In the cinema this resulted in prominence being given to the class war, satire directed at the opposition, and plaudits for the benefits of communism. But, though the communists gradually gained command of mass communications, instituted censorship, and made extensive use of the media for propaganda purposes, their controls were somewhat uneven. They were forced to compete with traditionalists in their efforts to transform society. The modernising tendency that criticised life before the revolution vied with traditional values in the struggle for expression of national identity. The resulting ambivalence is evident in many of the films discussed. The glories of Armenian religious iconography, its architecture, and its liturgical music are prominently displayed, yet the church is frequently mocked as in *Namous*, with its scenes of drunken priests; *Shor and Shorshor*, where the priest is terrified by demons; and in *Pepo* where the ceremonies in the cathedral are used to exchange gossip. Traditional family structures, the honour code, and the suppression of women are exposed, while at the same time women's passivity and their lack of influence in society are often depicted as "natural". Peasant dress, folk music and ceremony, and the vitality of traditional dances, are lovingly represented, but criticism of backwardness, lack of social mobility, and poor education appear to be absent. As Derobert rightly argues, cinema in Armenia was caught between the pull of the tradition and culture of the "ancient nation", and 'propaganda imperatives of the Soviet state' (1986:36).

### ***Stalinist repression (1935-56)***

From the early 1930s more extensive aspects of modernisation were forced through and Armenia became more urban and industrial. The policy of *korenizatsiia* was reversed and Russian nationalism re-asserted itself. Centralised Soviet control intensified, and the small freedoms available in the previous period to express in film an individual national identity were submerged under communist propaganda and

ensorship (Smith, 1997:664). By 1934 “Socialist Realism”, declared to be the ‘USSR’s official artistic practice’, infused the cinema of Russia and, by necessity, the smaller republics (Kenez, 1997:390-1). The impact of these elements of Stalinism on cinema in Armenia were immediate and long-lasting – narrative film production dried up to an average of about one a year over the period from 1935-56.

In small gestures to the glorious past, Armenian film-makers celebrated, in two documentaries, *David of Sasun* (Martirosian, 1939) and *Millenium* (Balasanyan, 1939), the mythical 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the national epic tale, David of Sassoun, the “saviour” of Armenia. And the logo of Yerevan



Studio (now in Armenian script), while still including the twin peaks of Ararat in the background, has the foreground figure of David riding on his charger in defence of Armenia.

Exceptionally, following the German invasion of Russia in 1941, the Soviet regime recognised the need to mobilise *all* the resources of the Union, and the power of Russian and minority nationalisms was exploited for the greater benefit of the state. Each republic was encouraged to produce at least one major film that praised its own achievements, especially where this was framed in terms of a historic national hero (Kenez, 1997:396). In this spirit, Bek-Nazarov made the epic of national resistance, *Davit-Bek* (1944). Ostensibly, this film, like those made by the other republics of the Soviet Union, was intended to project the notion of the ‘friendship of the people’ onto the past – demonstrating that the safety and happiness of the Armenians had *always* depended on their alliance with the Russians (Kenez, 2001:202). It concerns the uprising of Armenians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century against occupation of Eastern Armenia by the Persians. Under the leadership of David Bek, and with the help of Russian forces, a decisive battle is won, cementing Armenian-Russian ties. The film, which includes an ancient Armenian hymn on the soundtrack, was regarded by contemporary accounts as nationally inspiring (Pilikian, 1981:51).



Thus, in the period 1935-56 Soviet policy remained mixed – attempting to Russify Armenia but at the same time encouraging limited Armenian nationalist sentiment, especially during the war years. However, after 1947, there remained little room for the expression of national identity other than that permitted by the Soviet regime. In this period, ‘[a]ny expression of national pride or unique Armenian achievement was strictly prohibited. The leading role of the Russian people had to be recognised’ (Suny, 1993a:161). Nonetheless, Bek-Nazarov, who was in charge of Yerevan Studios by this time, seems to have managed a few gestures of defiance. While he continued to promote the making of documentaries which celebrated the achievements of the Armenian people under communism, he also supported those that praised Armenian artists, writers, and musicians; recorded major events in the Armenian church; and described the beauties of ancient architecture and monuments. Furthermore, in agreeing to make *Davit-Bek* he would have been aware of the propaganda purposes of the film. He would also have known that the full history was one of betrayal by the Russians who refused to support David Bek against resurgent Ottoman forces in 1725. Small gestures, perhaps, but they helped to keep alive Armenian national aspirations in this dismal period of their history.

### ***Cultural reform and the “New Wave” (1956-1990)***

After the death of Stalin in 1953 there was some loosening of centralised control over the Caucasian republics. However, the process of communist inspired modernisation in Armenia quickened: the economy changed from being predominantly rural to predominantly industrial and the population became increasingly urbanised, better educated, more secular, and more mobile than ever before (Suny, 1993a:189). Yet the breakdown of traditional rural social structures did not lead, as might be expected, to a lessening of the cohesiveness of the nation but rather to its opposite, a resurgence of national consciousness.

I have already touched on some of the socio-political factors that contributed to the persistence and strengthening of Armenian nationalist sentiment: the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* established in the 1920s and 1930s; the surge of patriotic nationalism encouraged during the war years; the re-establishment of the church hierarchy; and the large-scale repatriation that was encouraged immediately after the war and which resulted in an ever more homogenous population (over 90% Armenian by 1960). Even moves by the Soviet Union to attempt restoration to Armenia of the

former provinces of Kars and Ardahan, though never realised, were instrumental in keeping alive Armenian claims to territory lost in 1920 (Suny, 1993a:159).

The political and artistic “thaw” instigated by Khrushchev also allowed for greater freedom in the cultural expression of national consciousness. In a symbolic example, the statue of Stalin in Yerevan was pulled down in the early 1960s, to be replaced by a statue representing “Mother Armenia” (Suny, 1993a:181). The Armenian language became an ever more important marker of identity and writers and poets, previously condemned, were rehabilitated and reinstated as national figures. The state encouraged the erection of monuments to ancient heroes and anniversary celebrations for events such as the creation of the Armenian alphabet, many of which were duly recorded in widely distributed documentary films.

Cinema also benefited from the return to Armenia of a number of young filmmakers trained in Moscow. Narrative film production increased to three or four a year, though, because of continuing censorship, direct expressions of Armenian nationalism initially, at least, were kept in check. Films continued to convey national sentiment through music, image, symbols, and performance, and as a love of rural traditions. But now yearning for the lost lands became more evident. In one of the earliest films of this period, for example, *What’s All the Noise of the River About* (Melik-Avagyan, 1958), the opening credits are superimposed on a shot of Mt. Ararat, viewed from across the river of the title. The country across the border remains unnamed, though the use of a recurring leitmotif of “oriental” music for the “foreigners” seen on the opposite bank, signifies the river as the Araxes – the border separating Armenians from their former lands in Turkey.

The film seems to presage sentiments expressed by the poet Gevorg Emin:

What are we, after all,  
we and our land?  
Even if we try to mince the truth  
We are tourists in our own land.  
Guests in our own homes.  
A river with only one bank,  
A mountain which we only view from afar,  
An unpeopled land,  
a landless people,  
and scattered beads which cannot be restrung.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The poem is translated and quoted in Panossian (1998:149).

Though they have a homeland, the insecurity and rootlessness of the people – ‘tourists’ who have suffered forced migration – are coupled with loss, contained in the key symbols of distant Mt. Ararat, the river with ‘only one bank’, and the ‘scattered beads’ of the diaspora.

The Araxes carries great resonance, first as an indication of the divide between Europe and Asia, then as the border between Soviet Armenia and Eastern Anatolia. Crossing the river is a frequent literary and cinematic trope, not only marking the shift from ‘backwardness and poverty to potential material well-being, and from ignorance and darkness to easier access to the benefits of European civilization’ (Suny, 1993a:63), but also as an important signifier of nostalgia for lost lands, lands emptied of Armenians, and the desire to reclaim them.



But Melik-Avagyan takes this idea further by also denoting the water as something shared between the communities on either side of the river, something that unites Soviet Armenia with the former Armenian territories. To placate the censor, he inverts the yearning expressed by the exiled character Artashes.

Arriving on the Turkish bank of the river, he is observed in close-up, staring longingly across to his “homeland” in Soviet Armenia. But, his hunger for home is transposed into a longing for the *ancient* homeland, first by framing him against a backdrop of Mt. Ararat, and then with an insert of flying storks – the bird that represents home – thus bringing together home and homeland.

### *Malyan and the expression of communal identity*

This film is a relatively explicit expression of national yearnings, though clearly constrained by censorship. But, from the 1960s, especially after unofficial demonstrations in Yerevan commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide,<sup>16</sup> other new film-makers began more openly to engage in the discourse on Armenian

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<sup>16</sup> Suny identifies the first major outbreak of dissident nationalism, that is protest against ‘official limits’ on the expression of nationalist sentiment, as the demonstrations on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1965, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide (1993a:186).

identity. Henryk Malyan, in particular, created more subtle visions of what it means to be Armenian. In each of his early films, by focusing on the relationship of small, self-contained groups of individuals to the collective, he enunciates a separate identity within the confines of the Soviet Union.

Malyan's communities are held together by the everyday rhythm of their lives: literally and most obviously in the brass band of *Boys From the Band* (1960), but also the blacksmiths in *Triangle* (1967), the shepherds in *We Are, Our Mountains* (1970), and a family in *Father* (1972). They nurture subjective feelings of being Armenian, shown for example by the band playing an anthem together in harmony; or the team of shepherds cradled in the confining space of mountain slopes, steadily cutting grass with scythes, their arms and bodies moving in unison; or the atavistic thread that links the family to its "bandit" past.

He creates soundscapes, such as the music the band learns to play, a recurrent shepherd's flute, the amplified humming of bees around the village, and the sound of blades slicing through grass, which act as strong signifiers of unity. Together with the rhythms of work (also encountered in the films of Artavazd Pelechian discussed below), they serve to emphasise the cohesion of these communities.



Precise framing, or group photographs inserted into the films as "stills", delineate the boundaries of his communities. In this example taken from *Boys From the Band* members of the unruly band are grouped closely around their leader; and in *We Are, Our Mountains* the shepherds work as a team on the hills.

While Malyan expresses the strength and unity of the nation in this way, at the same time he exposes a dichotomy. Not simply as we have seen before, between tradition and modernity, now it is the ambivalent relationship of these tightly knit

communities to the outside world. He creates space in which they can express their identity, by distancing them, often in the framing of his shots, from an outsider. In the above example, Tsoiak, the interloper, is placed at the extreme edge of the image, his gaze directed disconcertingly at the audience; and the lieutenant of police in *We Are, Our Mountains* is most often an isolated figure set against the group. Consequently, there is always a sense of incipient loss in Malyan's films. For Radvanyi, the films 'speak metaphorically of an essential loss, a broken harmony' (1997:654). The community is always destroyed at the end by an outside force – the band is dispersed because of Tsoiak, the shepherds are sent to prison by the lieutenant. However, the symbolic loss evident in these films only becomes explicit in *Nahapet* (1977), Malyan's most complete statement on the trauma suffered by the Armenian people sixty years previously.

This film looks back to the early 1920s, and, in a long pre-title sequence, introduces the character, Nahapet, making his way slowly across barren hills. The soundscape speaks of desolation – silent, except for the sound of his feet and stick pushing through stones and dry bushes. Coming to a clearly defined fork in the path, he hesitates before walking on while bird-calls, like human screams, echo around him. The camera keeps its distance, observing, until he arrives at a half-ruined hut in a village. From inside, we view him as, again, he momentarily hesitates before crossing the threshold into the inner space. Through the open doorway we see the village band bizarrely playing a discordant march. These hesitations and the accompanying sounds denote important transitions – he has crossed a cultural boundary, becoming, however peripherally, part of this rural society.

Thus, Malyan introduces the notion of loss. This man, with his wary and self-contained demeanour, has had to leave some unspecified place, cross an unidentified land, and suffer extremes of hardship. Parallels with the forced exile of the Armenian people from Turkey are reinforced in a subsequent dream sequence where he is walking with a large group of people who, again, have to choose which path to take. Some go one way and some another; perhaps encountering death in the desert or life in exile. Only then do the titles appear, accompanied by a funereal march on the soundtrack.

Having emphatically, but indirectly, set the context Malyan begins to explore the effects of trauma on Nahapet and, by extension, on the Armenian people. Again

he makes extensive use of stills. Young village children repeatedly congregate round the open doorway – framed as in a photograph – to stare at Nahapet. This induces him to recall group photographs which we gradually come to learn are of his family that has been lost in a massacre.

Silenced by his ordeal, he retreats to the refuge of his hut where he sings softly, almost inaudibly, to himself as he stares into the distance. Visions of catastrophe and death are introduced by a persistent, slow drum-beat in his head. They become increasingly more explicit and are authenticated by a shift of perspective that privileges the viewer, watching Nahapet, tied up in ropes, seeing his family being slaughtered. His internalisation of these painful memories come to a climax when he meets his sister. Wordlessly they cling to each other, then softly sing a prayer together. The camera circles them, moving closer, narrowing the focus, to centre on their anguish.

One of Nahapet's visions is less personal, dramatically encapsulating a metaphor for the destruction of the nation. An apple tree covered in ripe fruit sways and shakes violently as it is buffeted by strong winds. The red apples fall to the ground where they roll, in increasing numbers towards the shore of a river, much like lemmings rushing to their death. They float away, staining the water red (as the blood of murdered Armenians is said to have turned the waters of the Araxes red). The camera lingers on the final image – a solitary apple floating on its own – relating to Nahapet, who, like a defeated man, withdraws defensively into silence and solitude, refusing to take decisions or to accept responsibility for his life.

From these depths of despair, Malyan charts Nahapet's recovery, step by step, through labour and his response to renewal in nature. He re-marries and together with his wife plants a field of apple seedlings. With the first tender shoots his human feelings are re-kindled and Malyan re-visits the vision of the apple trees. This time he does not focus on a single apple, but on the groups of apples that float off together – a symbol of the people, not like Emin's 'scattered beads which cannot be restrung' but as a community.

Though by the end of the 1970s, film-makers were permitted to be more explicit about the genocide, as with Avetisyan's *Dzori Miro* (1980), censorship played a large role in construction of *Nahapet*. There could be no direct criticism of Turkey,

no claim to lost lands, and no mention of an Armenia other than Soviet Armenia (Asmekian, 1993). The film had to highlight the beneficence of the communist party in bringing land reforms, rationality and enlightenment (represented by electric light) to the backward village; and, it had to have a socialist realist ending – the now elderly Nahapet striding through the village, accompanied by the communist leaders, carrying an apple tree ready to plant outside a house where a child has been born.

Malyan, however, subverts many of the censor's restrictions. By holding images of his absent family, linking them with the metaphor of the apple tree and the insertion of flashbacks, he creates a political space in which to tell a powerful story of the genocide that challenges the ostensible message of the film. Overall, he succeeds in evoking the resilience of the Armenian people and their determination to survive and preserve a separate identity through their own labours.

### *Resurgent Armenian nationalism*

Where Malyan examines how small groups of people continually recreate a common identity as the result of everyday events, Frounze Dovlatyan, the other major film-maker of this period, uses larger themes to explore different ways in which collective memory is constructed and preserved. His characters, such as the brothers caught on opposite sides in the civil war in *Brothers Saroyan* (1968), a disgraced government official in *Chronicle of Yerevan Days* (1972), and a retired teacher in *A Lonely Nut Tree* (1986), face a crisis, a break in their narratives, which forces them to reconsider their past, and by extension the past of the nation.

*Chronicle of Yerevan Days* focuses on the meaning of written historical records. In a key scene shot at the genocide memorial in Yerevan by the everlasting flame, the official, Armen, exclaims: '[Paper] always remembers. The whole world can forget, but paper never forgets'. The setting of this speech and the passion with which it is delivered, express anger at the world's lack of response to the genocide and to the rupture it caused in Armenian history.

The film concludes in the archives where Armen ponders the question 'who will remember us when we have gone?' before a dream sequence in which the archive starts to burn and is destroyed in a series of explosions. He searches frantically through charred papers and ashes blowing in the wind for the one piece of information that will tell him who he is, what his life has been for. His personal crisis is projected

onto the Armenian one of being a forgotten nation whose recent history has been negated by denial.

The critical event that affects a retired teacher, Kamsaryan, in *A Lonely Nut Tree*, is his discovery of an ancient dedication stone that dates the origins of his village to 1000 years previously. The village is dying gradually as all the young people leave, and the regional authorities want to close it down. Kamsaryan tries to revive interest in the place by organising celebrations to mark its anniversary. He invites everyone who has left to return, but they all make excuses and in the end no one comes.

The film is filled with symbols of the foundation myths of this people on their land – the dedication stone itself with its inscription; a repeated vision of the horseman Orhan from the legend of David of Sassoun; and a field of ancient *khachkars*<sup>17</sup> lit with candles. The lonely walnut tree of the title represents ‘longevity and productivity, a long history and connections’ (Pattie, 2005:52), and functions in a similar way to the Palestinian olive tree we will encounter later. But none of this is sufficient to keep the village together. As one character remarks, ‘why teach all this history? What the younger generation needs is to know about machines and technology, about the modern world’. Dovlatyan’s metaphors project the fear that the collective memory of this ancient nation, uncertain of its position in the modern world, is losing its power and relevance in defining its identity.

Dovlatyan dedicated his last film, *Yearning* (1990), to Malyan who wrote the script some years earlier. Set in the 1930s, it is the most explicit criticism of the Stalinist period made in the cinema of Soviet Armenia. Not only does it mock petty communist officials at village level who iterate slogans about the magnificent achievements of the new socialist regime, it unequivocally lays blame on the Soviet Union for the loss of Armenian territories a few years earlier, and exposes the horrors of the purges that destroyed many communities.

The film tells the story of Arakel, a poor illiterate peasant, now living in Soviet Armenia, who is consumed by hatred of the Turks. His visions of Turkish soldiers destroying his former village, burning houses, raping and murdering women and children, and taking over Armenian territory, are one of the most direct references

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<sup>17</sup> The *khachkar* (literally cross-stone) is a memorial stone unique to Armenia.



to the genocide in cinema of Soviet Armenia. Arakel cannot go on living without seeing his home again, and, in a tribute to the journey that opens Malyan's *Nahapet* he crosses the Araxes and the barren mountains until he comes close to his village. From a cave, he retrieves a dagger, hidden at the time of the Turkish attacks, and comes across a young woman lamenting over the dead body of a hermit-priest. Arakel silently watches as first she buries the priest and then takes all his books, wraps them in her shirt, soaks this with melted candle wax, and places the bundle in the grave. The sequence is a reference to the determination of the Armenian people to preserve their religion and its written texts at times of greatest danger.

Arakel at last reaches his ruined house. Here, Dovlatyan enumerates the vivid sources of memory as Arakel first visits his parent's graves, collects some soil, smells the herbs growing wild around the village, and weighs in his hand the fallen fruit from trees. He caresses the stones of the chapel where he was married, and sits by the hearth of an oven where he has a memory of his mother making bread. Dovlatyan floods these scenes with colours, smells, and sounds, and the feel of stone surfaces, that are inherent to memory. This intense and very personal evocation of a lost home is similar to that of Khleifi's Palestinians in *Ma'loul Celebrates Its Destruction* (see Chapter 8). And it contrasts strikingly with *Calendar* in which the Egoyan character seems to resist being drawn by memories to a homeland that is, for him, just an abstraction (see Chapter 4).

Dovlatyan ends with three images that summarise this film and, perhaps, the philosophy embedded in all his work. The first is the young woman who we have learnt is an Armenian, left behind as a girl when the village was attacked, and brought up by a group of Kurdish nomads. She cannot speak, but in extreme close-up we see her silently screaming in anguish for the Armenian people. As in his earlier films, Dovlatyan reminds his audience that the world would not hear the Armenian story.



Secondly, Arakel walks through a barren, stony valley, as white-shrouded figures silently look on, reminding his audience of the multitude who died and the few who remain. And finally the fire, still burning in his mother's oven, keep alive the hopes of his people with its eternal flames.



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The chronological order I have adopted so far illustrates the effects of capricious regimes of Soviet control over the expression of Armenian identity. The uncertainty of the first decade, which nonetheless allowed some cultural freedom, was followed by Stalinist repression and the stifling of artistic endeavour (relaxed slightly in 1944-5), and then, from the 1960s, the gradual loosening of state influence up to the breakdown exemplified by the criticism of the regime in *Yearning*. However, two film-makers, Artavazd Pelechian and Sergei Paradjanov, stand apart, proposing radical alternatives to the conventions and restrictions of the Soviet regime,. In different ways, they experimented with form and symbolism to create unique representations of Armenian identity.

## Experimental forms

Pelechian's work cannot easily be categorized. His films are not documentary in the usual sense – they do not claim to represent reality though they include much “found” documentary footage – nor are they narrative though they are open to interpretation as some sort of story. They are non-linear, wordless but not silent, without protagonists but with action. In both image and sound, Pelechian uses rhythm, changes of pace, repetition, variation of texture, and inversion, to create a strong subjective association between the various elements. He called his method ‘distance montage’, a mechanism of separating visual and aural elements and braiding different sequences together. The effect is almost musical, where the interplay of these different parts creates harmony and thus a form of tangible reality.<sup>18</sup> The other

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<sup>18</sup> Pelechian has somewhat mystical explanations for the effect of his methods: see for example Niney (1991) and (1993), Pigoullié (1992), Péléchian (1997), and MacDonald (2004).

essential element of his technique is movement, frequently embedded in a circular or repeated structure, which acts as a *leitmotif* or emotional device. *The Beginning* (1967), for example, provides shocks through the abrupt insertion of a still into a moving sequence or through suddenly freezing a short section of movement. This Deleuzian rupture and folding of time, to which I referred in Chapter 2, seems to challenge the very notion of a singular beginning and so a singular history.

Though Pelechian lays claim to universality and asserts that he has ‘never talked about a specific nationality’ (MacDonald, 2004:97), two of his films, *We* (1969) and *The Seasons* (1975), can hardly be disentangled from Armenians and their history. The former, opening with primeval fingers of rock thrust up into the sky, as if squeezed out by immense forces, volcanoes exploding in showers of rock and flame, and unstable cliffs collapsing, speaks of the instability of mountainous Armenia and the tribulations of its people. The movement of crowds, surging, swaying, ebbing and repeating, is like the movement of history in territory that has often served as the battlefield between its more powerful neighbours.



It is an imagery also reflected in Armenian culture more generally. I have already noted the importance of landscape in poetry and literature, and this applies even more to the visual arts.<sup>19</sup> For example, in the 1920s the painter Martiros Saryan embarked on a series of landscape paintings. The triptych from which this panel is taken, represents his homeland as a rural idyll in which mountains, rivers, and fertile valleys predominate. A monastery nestles on a hill in the middle-distance while women dance in a circle on

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<sup>19</sup> A sample of the work of several artists may be seen at <http://www.armsite.com/painters/> (viewed January 2007).

the flat-roofed house in the foreground. In another panel men harvest fruit and grapes, and begin to plough the fields with oxen. Over everything looms the twin peaks of Mt. Ararat.

Yet, unlike cinema about Kurdistan, in which the landscape frequently plays an important role, it is relatively absent from film about Soviet Armenia. Malyan reproduces some of Saryan's idyllic visions in *We Are, Our Mountains*, but his imagery of mountains, shepherds and their sheep, and the collective action of cutting of grass for hay, denotes a way of life that is threatened from outside. And Malyan, again, in *Nahapet* and Dovlatyan in *A Lonely Nut Tree*, appropriate Pelechian's stark images of a stony landscape and carved stones to signify a barren Armenia, "the land of stones".<sup>20</sup>

Pelechian himself creates the most strongly evocative essay on life in rural Armenia in *The Seasons*. Here he draws a mountainous landscape from clouds swirling behind ridges, raging torrents of white water, steep slopes of snow and scree. In this, he expresses the strong bonds between man, his beasts, and the land, with sequences of shepherds rescuing their sheep from floods, or bringing them down from winter slopes, man and animal embracing in their recurring struggle against the forces of nature. Naficy interprets the film as a 'family idyll' and an 'agricultural idyll', an accented product of 'antiquarian imagining' (2001:159)



deriving from Pelechian's 'intense longing for Armenian nature, bucolic life, and tradition' (ibid.:307 n. 5). Though the use of mesmeric repetition, slow-motion, and spectacular photography can give the film a romantic gloss, closer viewing suggests a deeper purpose. Through the everyday rhythms of work, and the annual celebrations

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<sup>20</sup> Recalling the legend that stone was all that was left when it was Armenia's turn for a gift from God (Avdoyan, 1998:6).

of life, which include dancing, a wedding, and the ritual dressing of a ram (a symbol of Armenia), he articulates the far from bucolic idea of a people desperately clinging to their identity. And his final image of mountains, now peaceful, pastoral, and eternal, strongly evoke their resilience after extremes of hardship.

Pelechian and Paradjanov were close intellectually, and both professed to reject nationalism. Paradjanov, in fact, was fascinated with the multi-ethnic nature of the Transcaucasus region (Abrahamian, 2001; Niney, 1991; Rosenbaum, 2002). His four major works, *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* (1964), *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969), *Secret of Suram Fortress* (1985), and *Ashik Kerib* (1988), were a reflection of this. They are not intent on defining cultural boundaries, respectively those between Ukrainians, Armenians, Georgians and Azerbaijanis, but on exploring the fluidity of these boundaries.

Though Paradjanov seems to have shared with Pelechian a belief in the impossibility of translating identity into words, they developed quite distinct modes of expression. In contrast to Pelechian, Paradjanov uses vivid colours and avoids naturalism. His images are full of strong references to the language, religion, and art of the different national groups, and, while many of his “authentic” rituals were invented, they still succeed in creating a strong sense of the enduring nature of their culture (Abrahamian, 2001:74).

Pelechian’s films were essentially suppressed in the Soviet Union which had control over distribution, and have rarely been exhibited in Armenia or elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> *The Colour of Pomegranates* also had a problematical production history. It was regarded by the Soviet authorities as ‘difficult’ because of its divergence from the norms of Soviet cinema and was only released after Paradjanov accepted that it be re-edited and cut (Marshall, 1992:190). It takes formalism further, being a mosaic of symbols and metaphors that describe the life and work of the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet and troubadour, Sayat Nova.<sup>22</sup> With a static camera and still figures, he creates flat

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<sup>21</sup> The film prints remained for a long time in the archives in Moscow and were screened only infrequently in the USSR and Europe during the Brezhnev era. Some of the films were exhibited in the first Armenian Film Festival in London in 1981, in North America in the 1990s and again in London in February 2005. The prints have only been placed in the Armenian archives in Yerevan since independence (Voskeritchian, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> The original title of the film was *Sayat-Nova*, but the authorities insisted that all references to the poet’s name be removed. For details of the production process see Steffen (2001).

images that imitate the ancient Armenian illuminated manuscripts and frescoes that first bring enlightenment to the poet as a boy. Paradjanov's expressed preference for painting is evident in his use of tableaux and the arrangement of symbols, such as the pomegranate, a dagger, books, musical instruments, and a skull, in a manner which replicates allegorical still-life paintings.

Unlike Pelechian, for whom movement is the key driving force, Paradjanov uses action and gestures sparingly. In the majority of his shots, figures remain static and are allowed only stylised movements: the poet, held in profile, turns slowly to look at the camera; the princess breaks a thread of the lace she is holding; figures slowly move from one pose to another. Paradjanov's vision is almost at the opposite extreme to Pelechian – he has no interest in the banal and uses motion as a way of infusing his scenes with some kind of mystery. Where Pelechian (and also Dovlatyan and Malyan) include scenes of shepherds rhythmically scything hay on mountain slopes as part of their daily work, Paradjanov's half-clothed young men cut grass on the roof and dome of a monastery, in a ritual celebration of the arrival of spring. Paradjanov's articulation of Armenian national identity encompasses the long history of its culture: the language, expressed in written and spoken texts; religion in chanted liturgy and bas-relief sculptures of *khachkars*; the poetry and music of Sayat Nova; weaving of richly coloured carpets and garments; and the dense mythical traditions of Armenia.

*The Colour of Pomegranates* ends with a stone-mason sealing resonating jars high up in a wall of the cathedral.<sup>23</sup> He calls twice to the dying poet: 'yerkir' (sing), so that he can adjust the position of the jars. Finally, he calls again 'merir' (die), and draws the black mask of death over his face as Sayat Nova dies. The vessels repeat the echo of the poet's voice – his words and songs have become immortal. Thus, Paradjanov has put himself in the position of a "visual troubadour", recounting and transmitting his culture forever. But what is it that his images transmit? Perhaps it is the 'blood-drenched history' of Armenia seen in the bitter-sweet red juice of the pomegranate that spreads over a white cloth in the opening sequence. Or Armenians as "keepers of the book", expressed in the scene of rain drenched books being squeezed in a press and then dried in the wind on the roof of the monastery. Or the

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<sup>23</sup> Armenian medieval architects placed clay jars, opening inwards, in the walls of churches to improve the acoustics (Abrahamian and Sweezy, 2001:115).

special relationship between Armenians and God embodied in the depiction of Sayat Nova as Christ, first suggested by an array of thorns at the beginning and then by his crucifix-like death on the floor of the cathedral. Or the passivity of Armenians in the face of suffering, denoted by the flock of sheep that crowd into the cathedral and tumble into a grave.

These and other interpretations have been offered for the visions contained in *The Colour of Pomegranates* and the film is rich in possibilities for critical analysis.<sup>24</sup> It has been rightly praised as a masterpiece of Armenian cinema for its imaginative rendering of the poetry of Sayat Nova and its depiction of Armenia's distinctive identity.



Grigor Suny's call for an 'open understanding of nationality, one determined equally by historical experiences and traditions and by the subjective will to be a member of a nation' (1993a:5), provides a key to unravelling some of the complexity of cinema in Soviet Armenia. This is a cinema that in its early years, especially in the work of Bek-Nazarov, was filled with ambivalence about the conflicting influences of the modernising drive of the Soviet Union and the national traditions of its people. It is also a cinema that, initially, was unable to reflect the recent history of the nation. The trauma engendered by events in the region, and rigorous censorship under Soviet rule, sanctioned only tangential references to the genocide and questions of territorial rights. And even the tricolour flag of the First Armenian Republic (1918-21) was forbidden during the whole of the Soviet era.

Though direct evocation of the ancient history and culture of the Armenian nation was also restricted, historical figures and events, ancient heroes, medieval churches, ruins, *khachkars*, and the Armenian language, made some appearances. Thus, at this time, and especially during the Stalinist years, the expression of a separate Armenian identity was relatively shallow, limited to music, dancing, language, subdued references to the religious tradition, and glimpses of a cheerful, vibrant peasant life.

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Rosenbaum (2002), Calonne (1999), Alekseychuk (1990-91), Sakojian (1995) and various authors in the special issue of *Armenian Review* (2001-2002).



Armenian society and identity remained bound up with the patriarchal family, and even by the 1960s, though women were much freer, attitudes towards them were ‘still in transition’ (Matossian, 1962:187). This is revealed by the notable absence of women filling central roles in film about the Armenians. They are objects and not agents; they serve the men and stand on the sidelines. Something of this attitude may be explicable by the history of the Armenian people – *Nahapet*, for example, is a powerful statement of the difficulty experienced by many men and women in forming relationships as a result of the trauma of the genocide. But this way of thinking is also the result of a continuation and adaptation of the traditional family hierarchy. The family, which formerly was the basis of the organisation of Armenian communities, becomes instead a site of the regulation of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Apparently free women, such as Maya in Malyan’s *Father*, are punished for their transgressions, and women continue to play a minor part throughout.

From the 1960s Malyan and Pelechian found ways of representing identity through images of daily life. Their cinema remains rooted in simple rural traditions and ceremonies, the regular rhythms of work, and in the cohesive power of the family. It records the *habitual* events that help to ensure the survival of a nation and that turns the *background* of our lives into a “national” space. This cinema constructs a community recognisable to its audience; something of which they want to be part – corresponding to Suny’s ‘subjective will’ to be part of the nation.

However, as I suggested in Chapter 1, banal nationalism works most effectively in stable states where the population is confident of its distinctiveness. In such states, people may assert their identity easily and without fear. Less fortunate communities, especially those deprived of their history or their territory, need in addition the recognition of an *otar*, an Other, different from themselves. Depiction of the Other, and therefore definition of the cultural boundaries of the nation, is very evident in cinema about the Kurds and Palestinians but has been restricted in Armenia. Perhaps one reason why the overwhelming, immutable symbol of Ararat hovers over these films – a reminder of loss and of the Other (the Turks) that obliterated Armenians from their land – is an indicator of the instability felt by Armenians, torn between their heritage and their Soviet reality. It is only with the later films of Malyan and those of Dovlatyan that the sense of loss in Armenian society begins to be enunciated more fully. In Malyan’s case it is society’s loss of the



ability to retain its identity when confronted with the wider world, in Dovlatyan's case it is the loss of historical memory through indifference.

National memory is, of course, a construction as well as a recollection. And all of these film-makers construct memory not just through narrative but more significantly through the senses which Gevorg Emin describes as the 'most powerful weapon[s] in the eternal struggle for existence' (1981:150). Taste is evoked in the frequent consumption of traditional foods at feasts; smell in the fruit, herbs, and berries that surround the villages; hearing in the language, music, poetry and song of the celebrations; and touch in the sensuousness of stone, wood, and musical instruments. Certainly sight and its corollary, movement, are foremost in cinema, and we have seen how Paradjanov, with colour, form, and composition, and Pelechian, with movement, powerfully reproduce memory in their films.

Cinema in Soviet Armenia, despite the restrictions imposed on it, perpetuates national identity by means of symbols of continuity, narratives of suffering and redemption, and the evocation of historical memory. In this way it was able to contribute to the survival of Armenia national identity. Unlike Kurdish and Palestinian film where the oppressor is all too obvious, the enemies of the Armenian nation are mostly absent from these films. The Turks, as perpetrators of the genocide are referred to only indirectly, and the colonial power of the Soviet Union is depicted as largely beneficent. It is only as the influence of the Soviet Union waned that film-makers, Dovlatyan in particular, were able to push the boundaries of censorship and introduce more nationalist themes.



In the newly independent Republic of Armenia (since 1991), and in the diaspora, Suny argues 'a new concept of nationhood [is] being invented' (1993a:1). But what constitutes being Armenian in this new nation, and how is it revealed? To paraphrase Suny: is this a people defined by its language (that many can no longer use); by its unique religion (that few practice); by its sense of history (of which many are unaware); by a shared national consciousness (which is actually fragmented), or simply by a way of life? (ibid.:3). In this chapter, I have argued that cinema in Soviet Armenia has been a "cinema of survival", largely concerned with representing and preserving an Armenian way of life in the *homeland*. The next chapter examines the

cinema of the Armenian diaspora which by its nature is fragmented. Its concerns with national identity are torn between survival in the *hostland* and memory of an imagined homeland.

## Chapter 4

### Return to *Ararat* – The Armenian Diaspora

A sequence from Egoyan's first feature film, *Next of Kin* (1983), offers an insight into a number of the profound tensions inherent in diasporan identity; something that occupies him variously over the next two decades. It starts at an airport baggage carousel where Peter, the son of a wealthy Anglo-Saxon Canadian couple, is waiting to collect his suitcase. Peter's voice-over explains that for the last year or so, in order to escape from his parents' constant arguments, he has assumed a split personality; fantasised being two people. We already know from earlier scenes that these fantasies have led to sessions at a family therapist, and that while reviewing videotapes of their sessions, Peter also watches those of an immigrant Armenian family, the Deryans, who gave away their baby son to foster parents.

The voice-over, continuing into the next scene, a hotel bedroom, describes Peter's fascination with therapy. He tells us how excited he would be to get involved with another family – 'to give direction to their lives' – and how he has decided to leave home and take control of his own life. In a slow pan round the room the camera discovers Peter recording these thoughts onto tape, as instructed by the therapist, 'as if ... talking to a stranger'. Having previously stolen a file on the Deryans, Peter now telephones them claiming to be their son. His conversation continues over a cut to the next scene which shows him riding an escalator up into the lobby of a hotel.

Egoyan, to this point has given us two transitions: Peter's emphatic exit from the airport, through a double set of glass doors, which signalled leaving his previous life, and the nervous meeting in the hotel lobby which starts his new one. Both settings are archetypal places of transition in the cinema (Naficy, 2001:chapter 7), but now Egoyan also introduces stylistic changes to heighten the sense of transformation. From the conventional tripod-mounted camera of the previous scenes he moves to a hand-held camera that tracks in with Peter as he meets his "parents". The following scenes are tightly-framed continuous shots where the camera, like the voice recorder, has become an intimate third-party, watching and listening to Peter as he takes on the role of Bedros, the missing son.



A solo violin, playing an elusive Armenian tune, counterpoints the framing of Peter in close-up, squeezed between Sonia and George, pushing himself into their lives. The slight, insinuating melody suggests that Peter is “recalling”, perhaps experiencing internally, a fantasy recovered

memory, of being Armenian, of being Bedros. For their part, as they drive him to their home, the couple easily convince themselves Peter is their son (though quite evidently he is not). To complete the sequence, Armenian music seeps into the next scene at the Deryans’ family home, as they sit down to an expansive Armenian meal.

These episodes provide an illustration of the way Egoyan imaginatively addresses the existential question of identity which commonly troubles people living as a diaspora.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I examine the extensive cinematic response to this question and to the legacy of the genocide, regarded as the defining episode of Armenia’s recent history. First, I consider the crisis of identity experienced by many in the diaspora and how the concept of a “diasporan nation” emerges. Then, I discuss how the expression of Armenian identity in the cinema ranged from denial for much of the first half century, through a resurgence of national consciousness from the mid-1960s, to deep introspection on the nature of that identity since the 1980s. Finally, I analyse the approach by some contemporary film-makers to representing the psychological impact of the genocide and its place in the collective memory of the Armenian diaspora.

### **A crisis of identity**

In the sequence discussed above, Egoyan introduces ideas of displacement and cultural demarcation, not only through the narrative (Peter leaving home), or by employing typical sites of transition (airports, exit doors and hotel lobbies), but also through formal means. The knee-height opening shot, taken from the moving baggage conveyor belt, is followed by interleaved scenes from Peter’s home life,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, discussion in Susan Pattie (1994), Pamela Smith (1986), and Ella Shohat (1995).

sessions at the therapy clinic, and more activity in the baggage hall, all accompanied by Peter's voice-over. The logical and temporal order of these scenes is not revealed until finally he collects his bags and we can piece together the story leading up to his departure from home. The enigmatic, fragmented style is then replaced with a linear series of scenes filmed with a hand-held camera and close framing. Egoyan thus employs a formal transition to denote displacement (in this case displacement from a disintegrating and "battle-scarred" home, but with the wider implication of displacement from a homeland) and the sharp cultural boundary between the Armenian community and their hosts. In his later films, and in those of Gariné Torossian and Tina Bastajian (discussed below), textural disjunctions of a more radical type achieve the quality of a signature.

Egoyan goes on to denote an instability of identity by the way Peter creates a dual personality, a fantasy of being two people. As his voice-over tells us, 'one part of you would always be the same like an audience – the other part would take on different roles – like an actor'. When he sloughs off one identity to assume another, the camera takes on the position of Peter watching himself, and the soundtrack becomes Peter listening to himself. But Egoyan takes the idea of instability further by showing the camera constantly in search of an authentic image, one that will pin Peter's identity. We see Peter through the lens of an omniscient observer, through a television camera in the family therapy studio, on monitors as the therapy session is edited, and in the uncertain hand-held camera that closely follows him into his new life. These varying views serve to demonstrate Peter's ambivalence. He withholds and reveals himself, but always *performs* his identity: variously that of "submissive son" to his real parents; confident "doctor" in the clinic where he views the Deryan tapes; the "lost Armenian child", Bedros; and "brother" to Azah, the Deryan's daughter. The instability of identity that Peter exhibits gradually shifts from what might be characterised as a condition of modernity to something that is more specifically associated with exilic dislocation in the Armenian diaspora.

Additionally, Egoyan expresses a diasporan fear of the erosion of ethnic identity by assimilation, through the tense relationship between George Deryan and Azah, which results in her leaving home. Azah, who is at least partially assimilated, refuses to conform to the patriarchal control exercised by George. By contrast, George, who is a carpet-seller, and Sonia, who is constantly preparing elaborate food,

are over-determinedly Armenian. Their home is filled with Armenian artefacts, rugs, symbolic alphabets, religious symbols, and music. They are part of a passionate and lively Armenian community, contrasted cruelly with Peter’s anaemic Canadian home in two, parallel, birthday party sequences. In the first, a distant camera observes the empty and formal setting, casting a cold eye on Peter’s embarrassment. The second is taken from Peter’s point-of-view and is crowded, close-up, and noisy – the Deryans are presented as actively displaying their identity and trying to take Peter (and Azah) “back” into their world.



Concerns over displacement, instability, and assimilation, may manifest themselves in any community of exiles. But Egoyan also touches on a more specifically Armenian issue; the absence of one or more family members, especially a son, caused by some rupture in the past, and the effect that has on those who remain.

Lorne Shirinian has noted the frequent expressions of anxiety over continuity of the family and by extension of the race in Armenian literature. For example, he cites the image of a poppy used by poet Peter Balakian to represent Armenia. Seemingly fertile, full of pollen for the next generation, in fact it is sterile; it has lost its reproductive power.<sup>2</sup> The traumatic effect of the



genocide on the Armenian diaspora thus appears as a figurative emasculation. In *Next of Kin*, Bedros was given up for adoption because the Deryans could not afford to

<sup>2</sup> Balakian ‘Reply From Wilderness Island’ (1988) cited in Shirinian (1999:79-80).

look after him when they migrated, but he takes on a more general meaning. By taking in Peter, George retrieves his masculinity and can pass on his culture in the male line.

Shirinian also argues that because Armenians had been treated as an undifferentiated collective, one that would be eradicated to solve the “Armenian Question” in Turkey, survivors ‘saw themselves as one large family in which [they] became brothers and sisters’ (ibid.:80). We have already seen a manifestation of this in *Nahapet* denoted by the difficulty for Nahapet of forming relationships. A further surfacing of the phenomenon appears in the tension regarding putative incest (a recurring theme in Egoyan’s films) between Peter and Azah. This tangential treatment of the trope of emasculation contrasts starkly with film about the Palestinians where, as we shall see, it assumes a more central role in the breakdown of the community under Israeli oppression (see Chapter 8).

*Next of Kin* was partly born out of the insecurity Egoyan himself felt on arrival in Toronto at the age of eighteen and his need to explore the Armenian identity which he had previously endeavoured to suppress (Naficy, 1997:190). He creates in Peter a palimpsest, seemingly devoid of identity, able to assume whatever role people project onto him. Though Peter is not Armenian, he is a diasporan “figure”, re-creating the diasporan condition. He answers the question, ‘Who am I?’, with, ‘I am what other people see of me’. He experiences displacement from home and makes the difficult transition across a cultural boundary. Uncertain of his identity, conflicted between the past and the future, he can only begin to feel at ease when, at the end of the film, he relinquishes his past.

### **The diasporan nation<sup>3</sup>**

The rupture of dispersal is not new to the Armenian people; they have endured centuries of forced and voluntary migration. However, the greatest dispersals, occurring around the period of the genocide in Turkey, resulted in significant communities being formed in the Middle East, France, and North America.<sup>4</sup> These

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<sup>3</sup> My contextual discussion on the Armenian diaspora is mainly drawn from Panossian (1998) and (2000); Bournoutian (1994); Suny (1993a:chapter 13); and Hovannisian (2004:chapters 12 and 13).

<sup>4</sup> By the 1990s, there were approximately 3-3.5 million Armenians in the diaspora: 1.7 million in North America and Western Europe; 0.5 million in the Middle East; and 1.2 million in the former Soviet Union (Panossian, 1998:162 and note 26).

diverse and complex populations have held differing views, which have also changed over time, of what it means to be Armenian. Even within a single community, Armenians have seen themselves in a variety of ways: as ‘immigrants, exiles, expatriates, refugees, part of an ethnic minority’ or as citizens of their host country (Shirinian, 1992:3).

Thus, for the Armenian diaspora, questions about cultural identity are doubly difficult, not just because of the issues of assimilation raised by Suny and summarised in my conclusion to the previous chapter, but also because of the well recorded political, cultural, and religious divisions between the many different communities, and the intricate relationships with their respective hostlands, and Soviet Armenia. Given such dissonance, what is it that allows Panossian to argue that the different communities developed ‘a collective consciousness’, sufficient to form ‘a *diasporic nation*’ – a trans-state entity with a will to maintain and project its identity (1998:156-7 original emphasis)?

In any society, tensions frequently arise between conservative and progressive elements, but in the Armenian diaspora these have been exacerbated. Conservatives, concerned with preserving language and traditions, rehearsing collective memories of the homeland, and keeping alive the notion of return, have tended to keep separate from their hosts. Progressives, on the other hand, have worked to create cultural institutions, such as schools and community centres, and to construct a sense of identity within the wider host culture; to become “hyphenated Armenians”. Panossian observes that these tensions in the Western diaspora, have caused the notion of ‘Armenianness’ to change, and that a ‘unique diasporan identity’ is being developed, based on a ‘hybrid and hyphenated identity and on dual loyalties’ encompassing both the hostland and the homeland (1998:162). He argues that, despite the differences, there is a powerful thread, a *subjective feeling* of being Armenian, that persists and binds the fragmented communities into a nation. Can we, then, detect Panossian’s subjective feeling of being Armenian in the cinema of the diaspora? Does this cinema support the notion of an Armenian diasporan nation? And does it reflect changes in national consciousness that have occurred over time?

I will address these questions by considering three broad phases of film-making in the Armenian diaspora. The first period, which lasted some 50 years from the onset of the genocide, is characterised by virtual silence and suppression similar to



that in Soviet Armenia. The second, coincident with the commemoration in Yerevan in 1965 of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, saw the release of a series of documentary and feature films that tried with varying degrees of success to re-awaken Armenian national consciousness and to confront denial of the genocide. Egoyan's *Next of Kin* in 1983 marks the beginning of a transition between these conventional cinematic treatments and a more considered and challenging approach to the question of Armenian identity and its survival in the diaspora that distinguishes the third period.

### **Repression and concealment (1915-65)**

A common malaise in intellectual life at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, brought on by a reaction to modernisation, is distinctively overlaid in the Armenian diaspora by the sense of abandonment, loss, and despair resulting from the Turkish attempt to exterminate the nation (Bedrosian, 1990/91:125). Among writers in English, this appears as a disposition towards mourning and an overriding sense of futility about the future, and for those writing in Armenian (most often first generation immigrants), as nostalgia for the lost homeland combined with a strong feeling of obligation to preserve language, culture, and traditions (Oshagan, 1981). Yet, despite its major influence, directly confronting the genocide appears to be extremely difficult; a state of mind summed up thus by poet Leonardo Alishan:

We are caught in a yesterday that devours our today and denounces our tomorrow (quoted in Siraganian, 1997:133).

Many artists, faced with a similar paralysing effect, also seem to distance themselves from their recent history in nostalgia and symbolism (Nercessian, 1981:222-4). A few, however, attempted to make sense of the genocide – something Kristin Platt suggests is ‘painting as a process of loss’ (1995:440-43). Of these, Arshile Gorky, who became one of the most influential Armenian artists in North America, provides an important insight into the artistic response. His most significant early painting, *The Artist and His Mother* (1926-36), refers beyond the genocide to the



ancient art of Armenia in its simplified forms.<sup>5</sup> Yet it also carries memories of the trauma forward to the present day, as we shall see in Egoyan's *Ararat* and Torossian's *Garden in Khorkhom* (2004).



Furthermore, the fragmented forms of his later style, floating freely in space, seem to suggest the breakdown of boundaries – cultural, historical, and geographical. In this, they epitomise the diasporan condition and influenced a number of Armenian film-makers. For example, his painting, *How My Mother's*

*Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life* (1944), inspired a film of the same name by Arby Ovanessian (1985), and his abstract, overlapping structures are discernible in the forms adopted by Torossian and Egoyan.

Gorky's abstraction provides an elusive vision of the past. But he also withheld critical information about himself, changed his name on arriving in New York in the 1920s, frequently misdated his paintings, and repeatedly lied to his friends about his life (Rand, 1981:1). It is as if he wished for his Armenian identity and his experiences as a survivor of the siege of Van to remain veiled.<sup>6</sup>

Cinematic response to the tragic history of the Armenian people by diasporan film-makers seems similarly to have been repressed at this time. For example, one of the most accomplished Armenian directors, Reuben Mamoulian, 'avoided revealing anything of his private life' (Spergel, 1993:1). Throughout his Hollywood career, typically in such films as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *Song of Songs* (1933), and *Queen Christina* (1933), he seems obsessed with the idea of double identities; of his characters living a double life. Time after time he employs the mirror as a device to

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion of Gorky's life and work see Seitz (1972); Golding (1975); Rand (1981); Nercessian (1981); Jordan and Goldwater (1982); and Matossian (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Gorky was a child in Van at the time of the Turkish attacks in 1915. He survived and escaped to exile with his sister.

avoid a direct view of his ambiguous characters; offering tantalising glimpses of their internal thoughts (ibid.:139). This evasiveness seems to reflect Mamoulian's desire to hide any Armenian identity in his work.

However, Mamoulian's interest in Armenia and in Armenian culture was intense. He certainly saw a number of the early films from Soviet Armenia, including *Namous* and *Pepo* which he viewed in 1936. He apparently watched the latter 'with surprise and great joy', delighted 'to see the face of my country and hear its voice ... the melody of the Armenian language, as sweet as honey' (Bakhchinyan, 2004:5). Mamoulian also considered making a film about David of Sassoun in Armenia but was prevented from entering the country by the authorities.<sup>7</sup> With such strong ties to his homeland, it is even more remarkable that he concealed all references to his identity in his work.

In France, a survivor of the massacres in Turkey, Henri Verneuil, began his directorial career in 1951 and went on to make many successful mainstream, commercial films over the next two to three decades. Like Gorky, Verneuil changed his name<sup>8</sup> and, in his work over this long period, he seems to have suppressed his Armenian identity and all references to the troubles faced by the Armenian people. It was not until 1991, at the end of his career, that he made two films, *Mayrig* and *588 rue Paradis* (discussed below), in which his Armenian identity is revealed.

In a parallel with Bek-Nazarov's attempts to preserve Armenian culture in Soviet Armenia, a few films were made in Armenian for the Armenian community in the U.S. The principal film-maker was another immigrant to America, Sétrag Vartian, who also started in the theatre, but, unlike Mamoulian and Verneuil, he made no secret of his origins (Kouymjian, 1989:2). His first film, a musical, *Archin Mal Alan* (1937), was based on one of his stage productions. He later completed a full-length film of the opera, *Anoush* (1945), and the drama-documentary, *The Life and Songs of Gomidas Vartabed* (1946). It appears these films were not distributed outside the Armenian community.

Though there were many significant literary and artistic contributions to the discourse on Armenian identity in the diaspora over the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Artsvi Bakhchinyan, Yerevan, April 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Verneuil was born Achod Malakian in 1920 in Turkey.

the prevailing reaction to the horrors of the genocide was suppression (Alishan, 1985:48-50). Film-makers mirror the trauma and self-inflicted amnesia that affected Soviet Armenia, resulting in the absence not only of most references to the genocide but also of virtually all expression of Armenian political consciousness at this time.

### **A new awakening (1965-1980s)**

Each diasporan community, of course, has its own history and particular characteristics ranging from the highly fragmented to the cohesive. At one extreme assimilation is widespread, at the other, motivation to retain national identity remains strong. In the U.S., first generation Armenian immigrants began conservatively, re-creating a cultural life complete with churches, newspapers, schools, cultural institutions, and political parties. But changes occurred quite quickly. The spoken language succumbed to pressure, especially among the children, and the written language also disappeared rapidly (Mirak, 2004:406-7). Thus, the second generation found themselves half-way between being Armenian and American. They faced a problem of identity. As Perroomian notes, they became ethnically schizophrenic – ‘American 6 days a week and Armenian for a few hours on Sunday’ (1993:139). Similar assimilation also occurred in other Western diaspora communities, whereas those in the Middle East largely retained strong links to their ethnic and religious origins. In this way, divisions arose between different Armenian communities.

The nationalist demonstrations in Yerevan in 1965 (see Chapter 3) inspired a resurgence of Armenian national feeling in the worldwide diaspora and a growing effort to force recognition of the genocide to the top of the agenda. The revival of national consciousness began to have some effect on film-makers in the diaspora. Documentaries and commercial feature films concerned with Armenian identity all became more evident. The story of the genocide, told from an Armenian perspective, resurfaced, and the existence of an Armenian people again started to register more distinctly with Western media.

### ***Documenting history***

One strand of diasporan film is plainly polemical and campaigning. It is exemplified by *Where Are My People?* (1967): the first in a series of documentaries produced by genocide survivor Michael J. Hagopian in the U.S. This opens with a “grand tour” of Armenian history that includes the legend of Noah’s Ark beaching on

Mt. Ararat; the conversion to Christianity in 301 CE; the ‘golden centuries’ which saw the development of the written language and when literature, art, and architecture flourished; the hero Vartan losing the battle of Avarayr (15<sup>th</sup> century) but ‘preserving the faith’; and the desperate decline under Moslem rule, until the ‘final martyrdom’ of the genocide.

Illustrated with maps of Armenia, extending from the Caspian to the Mediterranean, it re-constructs the myth of Armenia as an ancient territorial nation-state. Hagopian represents Armenians as a peaceful, rural people: happy ‘maidens’ dance, collect apricots, harvest grapes and produce wine – they are a people with a



‘zest for life and happiness’. He then evokes affecting images of the perfidious, cruel, and vicious Turks. The beautiful maidens are swept off to serve in harems, and images of mutilated victims and sounds of human pain and violence are used to elicit emotional response to the massacres. The film, made in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide, for the ‘survivors of the great martyrdom’, pleads with the older generation not to remain silent ‘as new crimes are committed against humanity’.

In their analysis of this and other documentaries, Kassabian and Kazanjian (following Freud) make a useful distinction between *mourning*, which is a normal response to the trauma of loss of a loved one or object, something that may be overcome in time, and *melancholia* which is a pathological response. The latter, the result of ambivalence about the loved object, does not allow its loss to be resolved (1999:207-210). Taking the example of Theodore Bogosian’s, *An Armenian Journey* (1988), they argue that it is the mythic nature of the Armenian homeland – the loved one in this case – that induces ambivalence and hence the melancholic response of

this film. This interpretation is supported by examination of *Where Are My People?* and several other Hagopian films, most of which display evidence of melancholia. By contrast, his last and most autobiographical film *Voices From the Lake: The Secret Genocide* (2000), could be classified as a work of mourning. In this, the lost object of love is no longer the abstract Armenian nation or the mythical homeland, it is his family and the people of his birthplace, Kharpert, and the surrounding area, who were massacred on the shores of Lake Goeljuk.<sup>9</sup> Here, Hagopian touches on the issue of how to relate private memories (the family mulberry tree) with abstract material such as diaries and photographs. In this there is a similarity with the very personal nature of loss we will encounter in Palestinian films such as *Ma'loul Celebrates Its Destruction* and *Haifa* (Masharawi, 1996), discussed in Chapter 8.

A number of other documentarists are also preoccupied with the genocide.<sup>10</sup> They often endorse a nationalist discourse on identity: affirming ancient Armenian ethnic origins, and evoking the unique language and religion, a glorious past, and a rich culture. Most of them are also historically reductive. They construct a generalized and idealized lost past, and at the same time homogenise the diaspora in an identity to be shared by all Armenians world-wide. Though it would be wrong to dismiss any of this work lightly, it may be faulted on two counts. First, many of the films make use of archival footage and stills that are often un-accredited and are open to interpretation; they offer a single point-of-view; they use witness stories affectively and without interrogation; and they provide only a partial narrative, one that often results in the creation of new myths. Thus, by presenting events selectively and emotionally they fail to give an entirely convincing historical account.

Secondly, in trying to construct a normative nation, the film-makers gloss over the complexity of diasporan society and effectively exclude many sectors of the population (Kassabian, 1998). For example, *Back to Ararat* (Holmquist, 1988), though applauded by one critic for 'validating' her existence as an Armenian in the diaspora, ultimately failed to answer her question, 'who is us?' (Avakian, 1998:62).

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<sup>9</sup> In 1915, Kharpert was a holding point for the deportation of Armenians from the surrounding towns and cities.

<sup>10</sup> These include *The Armenian Genocide 1894-1896, 1915-1919* (Ohanian, 1982); *An Armenian Journey* (Bogosian, 1988); *Back to Ararat* (Holmquist, 1988); *I Will Not Be Sad in This World* (Epperlein, 2002); *The Genocide in Me* (Artinian, 2006); *The Armenian Genocide* (Goldberg, 2006); and a series of other films by Hagopian.

More devastating, is the criticism of the territorial nationalism in these films. For Veeseer, Armenians are a 'non-territorial nation', at home wherever they are and in no need of such nationalist propaganda (1998:55).

Though these documentaries contributed to keeping alive the story of the Armenian nation over this period, the majority are essentialising. They perpetuate a mythical account of ancient Armenian history that supports the notion of a territorial nation encompassing lands that were only periodically under Armenian control (Hewsen, 2001:7-12). At the same time they exploit the genocide and the need for restitution as unifying forces with which to construct a homogenous diasporan nation. If these films failed both to represent the complexity of Armenian identity in the diaspora and to relate the genocide authentically, has the dramatic form been more successful?

### ***Dramatising history***

There have been a few attempts by commercial feature film-makers to engage with the issue of Armenian identity and the recent history of the people. The earliest of these was the plan by MGM to make a major film of Franz Werfel's novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1934). This is a sweeping dramatisation of the history of Armenian communities in an area of southern Anatolia who resist the Turkish clearances on the mountains of Musa Dagh, and are put under siege for fifty-three days before being rescued by the French navy. The screen rights were acquired in 1934 and Mamoulian was approached to be the director (Minasian, 1985-6:69). The novel contains many scenes of Turkish atrocities and, apparently under intense diplomatic pressure from the Turkish government, MGM abandoned the project soon after (Welky, 2006). Thus, it was not until nearly 50 years later that an independent film-maker, Sarky Mouradian, who had previously directed a series of films in Armenian, completed the film, now called *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1982). Though his earlier work enjoyed popular success, this film falls well short of articulating the ideas of sacrifice and the national determination to survive that are embedded in the novel. It was generally regarded as a critical failure (Kouymjian, 1993:5).

Another film, made in the U.S., *Assignment Berlin* (Toukhanian, 1982), tells the story of the assassination in 1921 of Talaat Pasha, the Ottoman minister of the interior, accused with other Turkish leaders of planning and carrying out the genocide, and the subsequent trial and acquittal of the assassin. Again, it is a crude



representation of events and lacks any dramatic tension, even in the assassination sequence.

The collapse of Soviet power in the 1980s lessened the constraints on cinema in Armenia and seems to have provided the release necessary for film-makers elsewhere to open up the issue of the genocide. For example, Verneuil made two films in France, based on his autobiography, that attempt to articulate the Armenian experience. The first of these, *Mayrig*, covers familiar ground: ancient Armenian history, the genocide, and the plight of the exile. In contrast to the other feature films mentioned, Verneuil's evocation of history is poetic and symbolic: a sequence of iconic images of Armenia – Mt. Ararat, an ancient church, shepherds and their sheep, the grottoes of Christian ancestors, *khachkars*, and the sounds of a flute. With the absence of maps and references to specific territory, it is as if Verneuil is explaining the myths and memories that allowed him, 'for a long-time' to call himself Armenian 'without knowing where to find that land'.

He then continues with a compact description of the 'agony of a people': first, by a taut dramatisation of the assassination in Berlin of Talaat Pasha and the courtroom scenes that follow; and then by the story told by Apkar, one of the immigrants, of his survival of a massacre. Unlike Hagopian, it is difficult to detect any authorial commentary on these scenes. Filmed efficiently, and graphically rendering the cruelty and heartlessness of the perpetrators, Verneuil maintains a distance that seems to invite his audience to decide for themselves on the authenticity of the events. In this way, *Mayrig* avoids the pitfalls of an over-emotional nationalist discourse.

After Apkar tells his story, he is seen to limp away down an empty, cobbled street, following tramlines which converge into the distance – an image I read as suggesting that, however badly they have been mutilated, the future of the Armenian people is assured. This scene marks an important transition. From this point on Verneuil does not refer to the genocide again, concentrating instead on the classical immigrant story centred on the boy child,





Azad Zakarian. The penniless family suffers hardship and persecution after arriving in Marseille, but through sacrifice the second generation “makes good”.

*588 rue Paradis* continues the story of the Zakarian family but now engages with tensions between the forces of assimilation and the desire to maintain a distinct identity. The obvious similarities between the character Azad and Verneuil – both trained as engineers and both changed their Armenian names to a more acceptable French name (Azad becomes Pierre Zakar) – is deliberately obscured. Azad is now a theatre director with a string of successful productions carrying such titles as ‘The Stateless Person’, referring to episodes in his past, whereas Verneuil became a film-director with an equally successful series of popular comedies and thrillers that ignored his past. The urge towards concealment is underscored in a flashback to Azad as a child, seeing a cinema hoarding for Mamoulian’s *Queen Christina*. He proudly proclaims to his friend that Mamoulian is Armenian, but goes on to say he has not seen the film because he never goes to the cinema.

In a complex opening, Verneuil focuses on these tensions. Pierre (Azad) has just completed rehearsing a scene in the theatre that mirrors one from the film *Mayrig* where he (or Verneuil) dances with his mother. Pierre is then interviewed for television, sitting in the stalls of the theatre. During the course of the interview, filmed images and television images repeatedly displace each other. Verneuil uses this sequence – images of Pierre shifting from the centre to the margins and back – not only to suggest displacement but also the crossing of a cultural boundary between his Armenian and French identities.

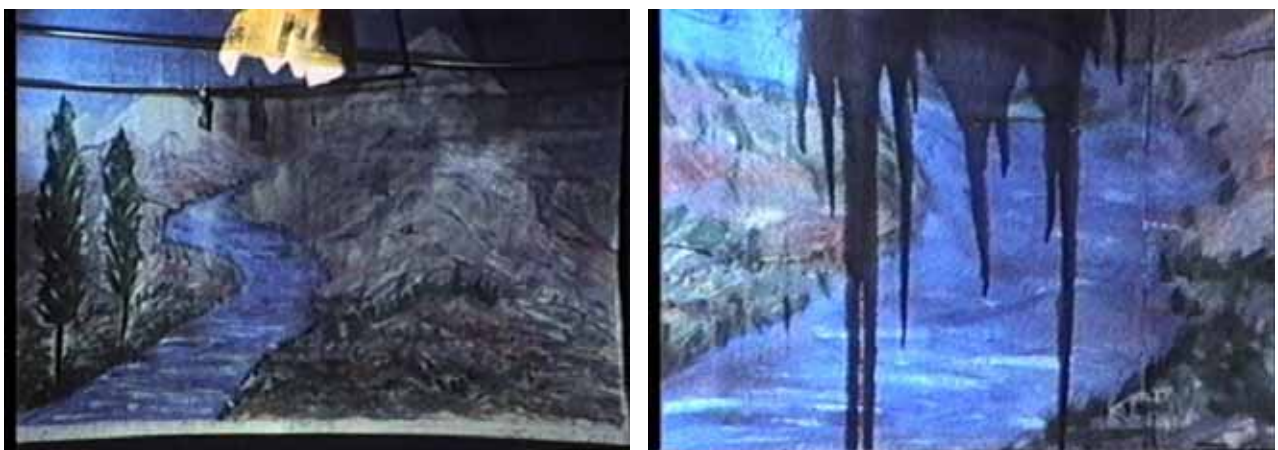


The condition of being Armenian in the diaspora has elicited cinematic responses ranging over repression; a tendency to celebrate assimilation; or to celebrate Armenian identity through repetition of myths and traditions and, perhaps above all, by memorialising the genocide. Verneuil, who would appear to epitomize each of these responses, begins, however, to touch on the deeper question of what sustains identity in the diaspora. It is true that in his last two films he displays his

immeasurable pride in being Armenian, recalls memories of rupture and displacement from an idealised homeland, and recounts the sacrifice by one generation for the next and the fight for survival in an alien culture. But, in Pierre Zakar, Verneuil also appears to argue that one can be intensely Armenian and yet not a nationalist. The character seems to confirm Veesser's view of diasporan Armenians as being beyond nationalism: that while they see themselves as a nation or 'tribe', it is in 'a worldly, cosmopolitan, sophisticated way' (op.cit.:55).

For Veesser, the process of identifying with the nation is *merely* a reaction to the condition of being an otherwise anonymous part of international society. Does this imply that Panossian's 'subjective feeling' of being Armenian is nothing more than the need for a people to articulate their uniqueness in the face of globalisation? If so, why does the boundary between Armenian communities and their hosts often appear so sharply defined?

*Pink Elephant* (Madzounian and Babaian, 1988) provides one possible explanation. Set in Beirut in 1982, it uses the seemingly absurd premise of an Armenian theatre group rehearsing a play during the height of the Israeli bombardment, to debate the position of the diaspora in Lebanon. The actors argue it is the 'meaningless rituals of remembrance' that are responsible for reinforcing their identity and separating them from their hosts. Though not resolving this issue, *Pink Elephant* warns of the danger of isolation; reminding his audience of the fate of the Armenians with images of Mt. Ararat, and the Araxes streaming with blood.



*Chickpeas* (Bezjian, 1992) and *After Freedom* (Babaian, 2002), which follow these Lebanese Armenians as they migrate to California, furnish other explanations: the never-ending power of the church to evoke historical associations; racial

discrimination which reinforces their sense of alienation; and, above all, the stifling confines of the family which forces them to turn in on themselves. Here, there are strong echoes of the strong family ties observable in film from Soviet Armenia.

While all of these film-makers expose the instability and insecurity of identity induced by the diasporan condition, the underlying fears seem to require a more detailed exploration of the psychology of belonging and displacement.

### **Introspection and analysis (1980s to the present)**

I started this chapter with Egoyan's *Next of Kin* which, I argue, marks a turning point between the literal and often polemical treatment of Armenian history and a more challenging approach to exploring Armenian identity. As we have seen, documentary and commercial feature films, with few exceptions, are selective: highlighting the dramatic, appealing to emotion rather than logic, and inventing that which they cannot reliably demonstrate. The artist, though, has an obligation not to be easily persuaded by nationalist rhetoric but to find a genuine "voice" in which to contribute to the memories that articulate the nation. Gorky, for example, believed 'man speaks most authentically when he does so *in his own speech*' (Rand, 1986-87:188). A number of Armenian film-makers, working in the diaspora over the last 20 years, have accepted this obligation, employing specific formal elements to examine the meaning of diasporan identity more systematically.

#### ***Recording and erasure***

In his second film, *Family Viewing* (1987), Egoyan focuses on the formalism of recording and erasure, the fragility of the image, and its authenticity. It consists of a web of stories centred on a young man, Van, who lives with his non-Armenian father, Stan, and his father's lover, Sandra, in a modern block of flats in Toronto. Van's Armenian mother has disappeared some time in the past, and her mother, Armen, has been confined by Stan in a nursing home.

For sexual stimulation, Stan videos himself making love with Sandra while engaging in telephone sex with a young woman Aline. Van discovers these activities and also that Stan is recording over old tapes he made of Van as a child, playing with his mother and grandmother. The Armenian language, such a critical marker of identity in the diaspora, which these three use together, is challenged by Stan. Erasure

of these sounds and images seems to be necessary for Stan's sexual potency. Van replaces the tapes with blanks to preserve the only record of his Armenian childhood.

Hence, one undercurrent is the story of Armen who epitomises the first generation refugee, separated from her family by the callous Stan, and placed in a home. Van moves her to Aline's flat, then to a hotel, then disguises her and moves her to a women's hostel. In Armen's frequent displacement, she embodies the diasporan condition induced by rupture from her family and home. Armen also is constructed as an individual traumatised by the past: she is passive, unable to communicate, and has apparently repressed all her memories. She lives in a cocoon of television images of the natural world which affect her behaviour and which are her only "reality". Van tries to cure her trauma by showing her the family videos he has saved, but her reactions are ambiguous. At first she responds positively, but then she is tortured by her memories (illustrated in flashbacks taken from the videos). Later still, she cannot or will not watch further images of Van's mother literally in bondage to Stan's sexual desires. In this oblique but powerful way (with many similarities to *Nahapet*), Egoyan shows the difficulty for the survivor to come to terms with trauma or to give an account of her history.

Van's unnamed and silent mother represents the second generation immigrant in the diaspora, invisible and subject to, but part of, the dominant host culture. She is also displaced formally, only appearing on Stan's home movies. Van, himself, is the third generation whose links to his Armenian identity, in the form of family and language, have been severed by Stan. Like Peter in *Next of Kin*, Van has lived seemingly without concern for the past, a carelessness expressed by Egoyan shooting scenes of his home life with television cameras, and allowing Van to manipulate his own story, using a remote control to "rewind" and "replay" earlier scenes.

It is only through visiting his grandmother and his discovery of the video tapes, that Van begins to question his real identity. He starts to resist the assimilation forced on him by Stan. He tries to recover his past by "saving" Armen and preserving his heritage in the form of the videos he salvages from his father's destruction. Van's quest for self-discovery and recovery of his identity seems to be fulfilled by the end of the film.

However, Van is also guilty of creating false images of the past. In Aline's absence her mother dies. Van arranges for her burial, with a full graveyard ceremony by an Armenian priest, which he records on video. But the record is flawed – the sound does not quite work – and the burial is counterfeit.<sup>11</sup> When Van shows Aline the video, ironically filmed by Egoyan in a video store surrounded by boxes of the most lurid fiction films, she rejects this artefact of memory. She has no wish to preserve a false vision of the past. Instead, she clings to the real symbol, her mother's grave with its stone left unmarked, unmediated, by Van.



Stan's role is primarily to raise the spectre of assimilation and consequent erasure of Armenian identity. In the early videos he is positioned as trying to remove Van from the grasp of his mother and grandmother and to suppress his use of the language. In a later sequence, filmed through a window, where the

pane acts as a barrier, Stan on one side and Van and his mother on the other, Stan insists Van comes over to his "side".

Aline and Van, in different ways, recover their individual identity and resist assimilation. In the final sequence, they come together with Armen and Van's mother in a women's refuge. Egoyan groups the four together in a master shot, cutting in clips from the videos, which in a sense may be taken as memories constructing the Armenian collective identity. But the question remains, can they maintain this fragile identity, set as they are on the fringes of the host society? This is a question Egoyan leaves unanswered, and to which he returns in his later films, especially *Calendar* (1993).

### ***Partial disclosure***

The difficulty of complete disclosure that seems to have infected Mamoulian, Verneuil, and Gorky, appears also to be a factor in the work of several contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> Van pretends it is Armen who died and was buried, so that he can secretly spirit her away from the home and out of Stan's clutches.

Armenian film-makers. For example, there is always something hidden or only partially revealed in Egoyan's films. The photographs of Bedros in the family album – images that contain the Deryan family's memories – are never seen; in *Family Viewing*, the opening sequence that uncovers Van and the television screen that will be the mediator of all his memories, is gradual and incomplete; the Photographer in *Calendar* is never visible in the landscape of his homeland.

In other instances of Egoyan's work critical scenes are absent altogether; scenes that by his own admission become more "visible" by virtue of their absence (Harcourt, 1995:11). For example, an explanation for the disappearance of Van's mother in *Family Viewing* is avoided, and in *Calendar*, the point at which the Translator discovers her affinity with the Driver (and thus with her homeland) is carefully elided.

This reticence is not confined to Egoyan. Tina Bastajian uses a mirror propped on a table to confine the image we see in *Pinched Cheeks and Slurs in a Language That Avoids Her* (1994).<sup>12</sup> A small white girl skips in and out of view; a black woman (perhaps an Ethiopian-Armenian) appears and disappears, seated at the table; and a group of chattering Armenians is



never visible. Above the sounds of conversation in the background, the girl and the woman tell stories of exclusion from the community: the girl because she does not speak the language and the woman, who because of her colour, is an *otar*, an outsider.

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<sup>12</sup> The composition is based on photographer Florence Henri's *Self Portrait* (1928) in a mirror. <http://dsc.gc.cuny.edu/part/part8/articles/davis.html> (viewed December 2005).

Torossian's films, *The Girl From Moush* (1993) and *My Own Obsession* (1996), play with the idea of the elusiveness of memory. Torossian herself appears mysteriously against a background of iconic Armenian images, sometimes as a shadowy face superimposed like a ghost, sometimes as a disembodied figure moving across the frame. Her partial self-exposure seems to suggest an exploration of her relationship to her Armenian heritage, a way of imagining how she fits into this culture.



These film-makers represent the instability of Armenian identity in the diaspora through fragments of memory, hidden and partially revealed. This trope of incomplete disclosure results in a representation of memory that, like Gorky's later work, is abstract and expressionist.

Following Freud, Laura Marks notes that 'the most powerful memory fragments are those that encode an incident that remains inaccessible to conscious memory' (2000:86). Shocking or frightening personal events are often repeatedly recalled in a fragmentary fashion with suppression of the most painful experiences. Clearly the genocide remains the dominant episode in recent Armenian history and it is not unreasonable for Lisa Siraganian to relate this to Egoyan's fascination with partial disclosure (1997:127-8). However, unlike earlier directors such as Malyan in Soviet Armenia or Mamoulian in the diaspora, most recent Armenian film-makers, including Egoyan, have no direct experience of the genocide. Though undoubtedly they are greatly affected by the catastrophe, perhaps it is necessary to look for additional explanations for these frequently disjointed narratives.

### ***Fissures in the record***

It is here that Deleuze's analysis of the disjuncture between the visual and the verbal in cinema, which I introduced in Chapter 2, is helpful. As he argues, such breaks in the narrative open up an indeterminate state; a space between two worlds that suggest the possibility of different interpretations of reality. In Egoyan's work this has become a structural device: the dream form of *Next of Kin* where Peter's audio diary is frequently unrelated to the images we see, where a phrase is repeated in



a different context, or where the voice-over may anticipate an event from another sequence; the abstract form, such as the photographs of Bedros in *Next of Kin* or the inside of a chapel in *Calendar*, where images are discussed but never revealed; or the partial or damaged form embodied in the use of untranslated foreign language in *Calendar* or the silent grandmother in *Family Viewing*.

Similarly in Torossian's work visual and verbal elements rarely intersect. She creates a multi-layered narrative in *The Girl From Moush* where images that may be associated with Armenian identity – churches, architecture, the Armenian script and religious artefacts – are structured in a series of 'chapters' denoted by different musical forms, and are set against a soundtrack of untranslated Armenian poetry which then metamorphoses into an English text. Torossian also explores an archetypal interstice in *My Own Obsession* by having a set of cameras triggered by movement. As she tries to step from one "space" to another, she disappears and reappears, evoking the notion of an existence between exile and "home".

An even more comprehensive set of disjunctions occurs in Bastajian's *Jagadakeer .... between the near and east* (2001). Several different, disembodied speech tracks weave in and out of the soundtrack: an oral history account of an Armenian woman survivor of the genocide; competitors in a radio quiz show devoted to 'Near East Trivia'; an Armenian voice-over, sometimes translated in sub-titles and sometimes not; and a Turkish voice-over translated in sub-titles. The material on the soundtrack is usually set in opposition to images that range from shots of the desert, a family group photograph, women in traditional Armenian costume, to belly dancers, and home movie footage of children playing games. Bastajian moves between different oral and visual representations of recent Armenian history, exposing the complex emotions of a people existing with the knowledge of loss. In a simple but effective sequence of children playing musical chairs, she expresses this fear of living in a world that, for them, is unstable.

### ***Time past and time future***

Just as the visual/verbal separation is prevalent in Armenian cinema from the diaspora, so too is the fragmentation and convolution of time. For example, there is the noticeable effect of denoting a separation between the continuous present (the life lived in the hostland) and a frozen past. As in Henryk Maylan's work, these diasporan film-makers frequently use the still image or photograph to represent the



past. In *Next of Kin*, photographs play a prominent part: not just the images of Bedros that constitute the family's memory of the past, but also the instant pictures of events involving Peter, taken to create a new set of memories.

Bastajian uses a group photograph of her family as a central element of *Jagadakeer* .... She animates the image by scanning it and focusing on individual faces, and re-constructs on the sound-track the moment at which it was made. Then, she "updates" the history contained in the photograph, projecting an image in negative to indicate that most of the family members were lost in the genocide. Finally, in a repeated sequence (sometimes shown in reverse), a woman in traditional Armenian costume receives the picture and passes it on to someone else out of the frame. She appears to be the custodian of this history, passing it from one generation to the next.



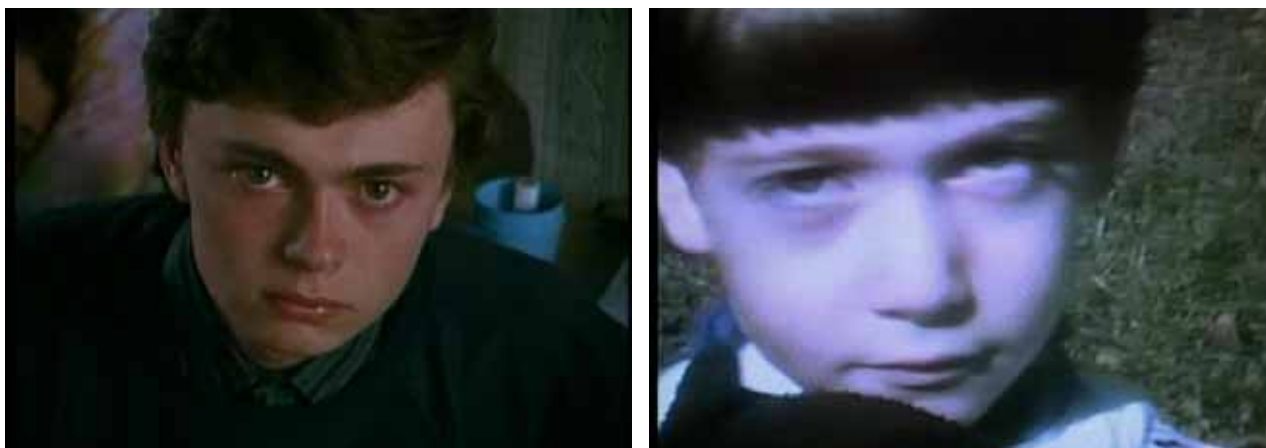
With *Family Viewing* and *Calendar*, Egoyan continues to develop the notion of the division of time, now with videotape representing a preserved past. The videos taken by Stan are a family history, and the separation of past and present is rather obvious. However, by *Calendar* this formal trope has become more complex. Video now represents the fragmented memories of a trip to the Armenian

homeland by an assimilated Canadian-Armenian. Images and sounds loaded with significance to a diasporan Armenian are pervasive: Mt Ararat, churches, the Armenian script, shepherds, a flock of sheep, voices on a radio, bells and songs. But personal memory constantly intrudes. The video is fast-forwarded or reversed as if the Photographer is searching for a particular image. Sometimes he questions the image, sometimes he lingers on the body of his wife, sometimes he painfully reconstructs her gradual estrangement from him. But always, the film suggests that time past is not permanent, memory is not immutable. Naficy likens this scrutiny of the image to a lover's scrutiny of letters, looking for a clue to the loved one's state of mind (2001:137).

While a concrete national history seems to be embedded in the stones of churches and temples that the Photographer is precisely recording for a calendar, their "meaning" has to be explained by the Armenian Driver, and "interpreted" by the Translator. Shepherds on the hills and a flock of sheep that endlessly passes by the car window seem to be an evocation of unchanging rural Armenian life, traditions that stretch back into the historical past, yet in the Photographer's memory these images denote the points at which he is alienated from his wife and from his "homeland". If collective memory defines a nation, the projection of canonical images of that nation, such as those of a calendar, can have, as Egoyan acknowledges, an 'overwhelming effect on the intensity of nationalism' (director's commentary on the DVD). But, by juxtaposing points at which these images are captured with the more immediate and personal memories recorded on video, Egoyan questions the relationship between the historical nation that is recalled by the images and modern diasporan Armenians represented by the Photographer.

Secondly, there is the "intrusion" of the past into the present: still or video images of events or people replace their actual "presence" in the film, and this has the effect of emphasising their "absence". Naficy observes a common feature of accented film-makers is the way one medium seems to '[take] up residence within another', just as the past haunts the present (2001:4).

We can see the development of this idea in Egoyan's work from its earliest manifestation as a photograph album in *Next of Kin*, through the videos in *Family*



*Viewing*, where Van's past directly confronts him. Here, a repeated sequence that also concludes the film, shows Van looking intently at a television screen where an image of Van, as a young boy, approaches him and stares uncertainly into his unknown future. Van present and Van past are joined by this impossible connection.

The past, captured on video, assumes even greater importance in *Calendar*. It nearly overwhelms the Photographer with its potent images as he tries to exorcise the trauma of his loss. By *Ararat*, the subject seems to require an even more definitive separation of the past from the present; the historical story of the defence of the city of Van and the genocide is told as a film-within-a-film. The actual, the story of a diasporan Armenian community living in Canada, is separated from but intimately bound up with the virtual, to an extent that, at times, they almost merge, as in the sequence cited at the beginning of Chapter 3.

Bastajian not only embeds photographs and still images in *Jagadakeer ...*, which she animates to give them a new history, she also includes projected "home movies". The latter have the effect of "sediments", like grounds left in a cup of Armenian coffee, that have to be "read". The present in her film is subjugated to the past in a melancholic response to Armenian history. But this trope of weaving the past into the present is, perhaps, taken to its limit by Torossian in *The Girl From Moush*, where she pastes 8mm strips of film over a 16mm master. Here, the effect is complex. At first the stills provide routine images of Armenia: the landscape, a peasant, Mt. Ararat, a woman in traditional costume, portraits, a carpet design, and an ancient manuscript. Then, as if trying to relate herself to the culture of Armenia and to peer into the past, Torossian manipulates strips of the 8mm film that contain

architectural images, portraits of Paradjanov, musical instruments. Sometimes these slip out of synchronisation with the master frame, sometimes they dance in time to the music, sometimes they are filtered expressively.

Thus, we have seen in diasporan film the fragility of identity inflected by a fear of assimilation; disjointed narratives that may be related to the genocide; fissures and gaps that suggest an unstable relationship to the spaces of the host- and home-lands; and the division of time that indicates a questioning of memory. Indeed, the approach to memory in the works by Bastajian and Torossian is almost obsessive. The virtual and the actual merge. In Torossian's words 'wherever I go ... I am always an Armenian'. By contrast, I would argue, however fascinated Egoyan is with representations of the past, he emphasises the importance of living in the present; of rejecting "frozen images" of the past. And, as we shall see, he questions the integrity of this type of imagery in his later films.

## **Remembering and forgetting**

I have already referred to Renan's idea of the nation as a set of memories that constitute a narrative of the past, held somehow in common, and perpetuated into the present by various means – the "collective memory". If we admit this concept, then we must be aware that these memories may be contested; people may see things in different ways deliberately or unconsciously. And, since the collective memory has to be preserved over time, maybe over long spans of time, who do we entrust to decide what is retained and what is left out as memory is passed forward? Which memories do we take as representing the nation?

Thus far, I have shown how some diasporan Armenian film-makers instinctively propagate only certain aspects of the national narrative. The majority of documentarists and many feature film-makers fall into this category. Others challenge the truthfulness of the collective memory and question how it is transmitted. For example, we have seen the process of selective recollection revealed in *588 rue Paradis*, an ambiguous and partial disclosure of truth in *Family Viewing*, and the different truths contained in the same event, according to the manner of its viewing, in *Pinched Cheeks* .... The mutability of memory and the distorting effects of its mediation are central concerns of Egoyan's early works. He, in particular, is

concerned with the problems of ‘transmission errors’; how memories may be deformed as they are passed on from one generation to the next (Porton, 1997:8).

However, there is also an ethical and moral dimension to the preservation of memory. Margalit recalls his parents’ argument about how the Holocaust should be remembered. His mother suggested the remaining Jews should form ‘communities of memory’ in honour of the dead, whereas his father insisted that this would repeat the ‘terrible mistake’ of the Armenians – to live ‘just for the sake of retaining the memory of the dead’. Better, he said, to think about the future and not become a community ‘governed from mass graves’ (2002:viii-ix). Margalit goes on to argue that those who are involved in the transmission of memory, who tell stories of the past, have a moral duty to consider what they do and how they do it (ibid.:104-6).

Those who have been traumatised – who exhibit a pathological response to trauma – seem incapable of separating the need to preserve memories of the past from the need for renewal and healing. Some though, such as Malyan with *Nahapet*, Verneuil in his last films, and Bastajian with *Jagadakeer ...*, find ways of using film to show how to work through trauma to a resolution. Malyan’s explicit shots of murder and rape, shown in flash-back, and the image of the assassination of Armenians, symbolised by apple-trees, perpetuate the story of the genocide. But rather than calling for retribution, he suggests a new beginning is possible. Verneuil’s final images of his mother installed in ‘588 rue Paradis’, the house and garden replicating her former life in Armenia, seem to argue for a kind of acceptance. His Armenians will survive and their culture will be maintained even though forced into exile. Bastajian has a more mixed message. *Jagadakeer ...* keeps the trauma in the present through the quiz show and oral histories that talk of extermination, forced exile, and the denial of genocide. Her metaphor of musical chairs, with its accompanying text ‘if you see an empty chair in your dream you will never be content wherever you are’, seems to preclude healing. Even the pre-genocide family photograph, with its implication of inestimable loss, is the memory she seems to want passed from one generation to the next. Yet, there is a form of apology for ‘this calamity, this crime’, delivered in Turkish, that hints at potential reconciliation.

However, Egoyan remains the Armenian film-maker most troubled by the ethics of the representation of memory. In his second decade of film-making, that includes *Calendar* and *Ararat*, he deals with the diasporan condition, identity, the

trauma of loss, and our access to the past. It has been noted elsewhere that the three main characters of *Calendar* represent three aspects of Armenian identity: the Driver, an Armenian living in Armenia; the Photographer, a second-generation, assimilated Canadian-Armenian; and the Translator, his wife, a first-generation, Armenian-speaking Canadian-Armenian. The couple are both visiting the country for the first time after the end of Soviet rule. Through the central character of the Photographer – it is his point-of-view that we most often see – Egoyan explores the relationship of a diasporan Armenian to the newly available homeland. This relationship is uncertain: the Photographer lacks understanding about what he observes; he has no ‘natural’ feeling for the land and its history; he is alienated and retreats behind the comforting barrier of his camera. We are given to understand that he suffers the loss of his wife, not only to the other man but also to this foreign country.

Told retrospectively, *Calendar* proceeds programmatically to show how, by working through his personal memories in a series of meetings with women from an escort agency, piecing together the events that led to this rupture, the Photographer comes to comprehend his grief. Fixed photographic images from a calendar that punctuate the scenes correspond not only to real places and real things in Armenian history, but also



to places where events occur in the lives of the fictional characters. The film of the Photographer, making images of real places that are part of Armenian historical memory, is interleaved with film of “false” events, denoted by the different escorts (false relationships), performing an erotic service (the falsity of pornography), in languages he doesn’t understand. As he creates the true images, the Driver provides him with a history, a set of stories about each place, mediated through the Translator. These stories intrude upon the simple reality of the place and the Photographer is always trying to suppress them.

The false events are also interspersed with “memories”, captured on video tape, that may or may not be true. Some are typical diasporan views of the homeland – churches, Mt. Ararat, *khachkars*, the rural idyll – some are more personal reactions

to what he observes. He focuses on the body of his wife in the countryside, notes how she becomes closer to the Driver (their shadows cross, they sing together), and shows her becoming more distant and torn between himself and the Driver. The Photographer is able to relinquish his need for myths and lies when he finally uncovers the truth of his own complicity in the loss of his wife and their eventual separation.

Margalit argues that the personal use of ‘remember’ is akin to ‘know’, whereas the collective use is closer to ‘believe’ (op.cit.:59). Egoyan shows that personal memories can be manipulated, reversed, replayed, and suppressed: in *Calendar* it is only when the Photographer confronts his loss, that the memories fall into place and he can be reconciled; it is only then that he ‘knows’ what really happened. But Egoyan also demonstrates that collective memories may also be unreliable. The images of historical ruins set in their physical context, which should gain additional authenticity by being displayed in a calendar, one of the canonical forms for conveying belief in a common history, are also carefully constructed, lit, and framed. Thus, Egoyan argues, ‘all that’s bound to protect us’, (that is, all that’s bound to protect Armenian identity in the diaspora) is ‘bound to isolate’ Armenians and is ‘bound to hurt’. These explorations of the nature of memory seem to be a call, not to relinquish Armenian identity, but neither to let it become a barrier to their future.

Nearly a decade later, Egoyan released *Ararat* (2002), a film that also has excited much critical and academic attention,<sup>13</sup> and in which he has continued to elaborate his formal and thematic concerns with identity and memory (Egoyan, 2002:vii-xii). The fragmented stories, disjointed image and sound, non-linear time sequences, and variety of media, that are characteristic of his previous essays, serve their purpose in depicting the main protagonists’ search for truth about themselves and their pasts. But, central to this work is an exploration of the *ethical* issue of the transmission of collective memory, in particular memory of massacres and the genocide, which Egoyan chooses to do through two artfully linked stories: “his” film, and a film-within-the-film, both called *Ararat*.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Ciment (2002) Masson (2002), Laçiner (2002), Kristensen (2003), Romney (2002), Mazierska-Kerr (2000), and Afeyan (2002)



The elements of his method are carefully laid out in the opening sequence. The camera focuses, and lingers, on a coat button hanging by a thread from a pin on a wall, then tracks slowly across an old, torn, black-and-white photograph of a boy standing next to a seated woman, and on to an image of the photo, transferred in pencil onto squared paper. The title in Armenian flows into the English *Ararat* (a hint at the “interpretations” we will witness). Still tracking, the lens picks out a model carved *khachkar*, brushes, oils and paints, before settling momentarily on different painted versions of the sketch.



Finally, we see the back of a man’s head, to the right of the frame, staring out of a misted window. A blur of moving shapes resolves slowly into people walking through an airport lobby and then a matching shot of the character, Edward Saroyan, in full face to the left of the frame. The two could be staring at each other across time.

The meaning of the sequence is only slowly revealed, though we learn quite quickly that the artist is Gorky and the photograph is the basis of *The Artist and His*



*Mother*. However, the notion of transfer and multiple mediations of memory is deeply embedded in the opening.

An event (the photographic sitting in Van around 1912) has been transformed into an image on paper by a camera, then into a large sketch using squared paper and pencil, then into different representations with brushes and paint, and finally into the recreation of Gorky's studio in Egoyan's film. The collage, behind the artist as he stares out of the window, is a complex representation of his memory of loss transformed into art. On the other hand, Saroyan, whom we learn later is a film-director visiting Canada to make an epic film about the defence of Van, is framed by highly symbolic representations of Armenia – Mt. Ararat and the pomegranate. Thus, we are introduced to Egoyan's way of representing memory and Saroyan's; linked not only by the suture across the opening scenes, but also by the figure of Gorky, and the button that appears prominently in both films, and ends the latter.

Saroyan and Rouben, his writer, make much of the 'truth' of their story. Perhaps in a reference to *Mayrig*, Saroyan claims the film is his mother's story and reproduces everything she told him, while Rouben asserts that his script is the result of 'five years research'; that every scene is based on the contemporary journals of Clarence Ussher. Yet, they are both unashamed to distort the truth, to use 'poetic licence', to exaggerate young Gorky's role in the defence of Van, and to imply at least that he took part in the death march after withdrawal. Saroyan's motivation becomes clear halfway through shooting, when he explains:

Do you know what causes so much pain? Not the people we lost, not the land, but to know we could be so hated. Who *are* these people who could hate us so much? How can they still deny their hatred ... and so hate us even more?

For him, it is not so much truth that matters as a representation of this hatred and a challenge to the denial of the genocide. His version of the truth, rendered in vivid colour and appalling detail, leaves no room for doubt, no space for detachment, and no scope for reconciliation.

Where Saroyan's film is a one-dimensional recreation (as far as we are allowed to view it) of events at Van and the massacre of refugees, Egoyan's is a multi-layered inquiry into the transmission of memory, told mainly through the historic character of the adult Gorky, and the fictional characters of an Armenian art-

historian, Ani,<sup>14</sup> her son, Raffi, and her step-daughter (and Raffi's lover) Celia. A series of scenes links Gorky and his painting to the fictional characters and to Saroyan's film.

First, Egoyan creates a highly-charged vision of Gorky's studio through close framing and misty filtering. As the artist reverently paints the face of his mother, Armenia is recalled on the soundtrack, and the camera tracks in to the photograph that is his model. There is a cut to Saroyan's film, where young Gorky and his mother walk through what is plainly a studio set of Van and pose together for a photographer. Another cut takes us to a hall where Ani is giving a lecture, next to the projected image of the photograph. This sequence, containing three changes of time and space, from 1930s New York, to 1912 Van, to the present day in Toronto, raises questions of interpretation. Egoyan interprets Gorky interpreting the photograph, the taking of which is interpreted by Saroyan. Finally, the photograph is interpreted by the art historian: the flowers the young Gorky holds are 'a fragrant gift to his absent father'; he is 'prematurely solemn'; and his mother, Shushan, 'looks bravely at the camera, challenging her absent husband'.

Celia, in the audience, contests Ani's speculative explanation, arguing she is confusing history with her personal story. After a pause for thought, Ani continues her lecture with a slide of the painting which she emphasises is not just a reproduction but a 'work of art' with which 'Gorky had saved his mother from oblivion – snatching her out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal of life'. Back in his studio, Gorky stands back from his painting and picks up the button, an action that takes us back to the photographer. The button missing from young Gorky's coat causes them to pose for a second photo.

Egoyan presents us with an animation of the circumstances of the taking of a photograph, something we have seen earlier in Bastajian's *Jagadakeer* .... In that film, it is designed to give a new "history" to an evocative artefact. Here, it stands in as a critique of the type of film Saroyan is making – heartfelt, but "crippled" by memories passed on to him by his mother. Egoyan contrasts this with "his own" animation of the circumstances of making the painting, which he continues in a

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<sup>14</sup> The character Ani, and the film *Ararat*, take some inspiration from Nouritza Matossian and her book *Black Angel* (2001).

subsequent scene where Gorky, in a highly emotional state, erases the hands of his mother. Though this is also a speculative interpretation,<sup>15</sup> by its very indirection, it says more about the pain of loss and the horror of the genocide than all of Saroyan's film. Egoyan seems to argue that this work of art, like the genocide memorial in Yerevan, is a way of remembering *and* forgetting.

Torossian uses the Gorky studio scenes from *Ararat* in her film, *Garden in Khorkhom*, together with readings from his letters and Matossian's book, to recreate this 'sinew of identity' between his painting and ancient Armenian history. A similar form of resolution is achieved by Raffi, returning from a secret visit to film in Eastern Anatolia. He tries to explain his confused feelings over the fate of the Armenian people:

When I see these places, I realise how much we've lost, not just the land, and the lives, but the loss of any way to remember it – there is nothing here to prove that anything ever happened.

It is then he discovers, among the images he has brought back, carvings from the monastery at Aghtamar of a Madonna and child and makes a link to Gorky's painting. Finally, he understands the lineage from ancient Armenian religious carvings, to the photograph, to the sketch, to the painting. The truth embodied in Gorky's art is revealed, apparently allowing Raffi to put aside the painful history knowing it will never be forgotten. Egoyan seems to suggest there is a way to remember the past without being incapacitated by those memories.



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<sup>15</sup> Gorky frequently left the hands unfinished or unresolved in his paintings (including a self-portrait, c.1937). Some art historians argue this was an indirect reference to his uncertainty as an artist, others to his desire not to finish a painting completely. I have not found any references to deliberate erasure as suggested by this film.

## Conclusions

When Renan argued that national memory – the collective memory – is at the heart of national identity, he was, of course, writing in the context of the nation-state. He had in mind a canonical memorialisation of the past embedded in monuments, flags, national heroes, histories, and so on. Contemporary Armenian diaspora communities have organised themselves similarly in a trans-state context, that is, they try to preserve common language, religion, and traditions, but separate from those of their respective hosts. They have idealised the homeland as a ‘paradise’, and their ‘ancient kingdom’ (Pattie, 2005:54-61). In these circumstances it is more appropriate to think in terms of what Margalit calls, ‘communities of memory’ (akin to Panossian’s ‘diasporan nation’) rather than nation-states.

The previous chapter showed that cinema was instrumental in preserving Armenian identity within the Soviet Armenian state, and I argued that it was a “cinema of survival”. This chapter has focused on cinema in the Armenian diaspora; a cinema which operates across state boundaries, and which finds an audience wherever there are Armenians. I have concentrated on the way this cinema, by accentuating the glory and importance of ancient Armenian culture, contributes to the formation of an Armenian community of memory. In particular, the use of language, religious symbols, and architecture attest to the long duration of Armenian identity. However, film-makers remain vaguely uneasy in the knowledge that the ancient culture is essentially irretrievable and unsustainable; the identity they are searching for has increasingly become symbolic.

I have also argued that the documentaries and many of the feature films examined tend to convey a homogenous Armenian identity. Their representations of the homeland are flecked with ambiguity given the possibility that homeland might have different meanings for different parts of the community. The question, Where is my homeland?, is never addressed satisfactorily. Much of contemporary art cinema, on the other hand, challenges the concept of a fixed, unchangeable Armenian identity. It has tried to avoid the calcification of old ideas and old symbols in addressing the question, Who am I? Instead, the work of Egoyan, and to a lesser extent, Bastajian and Torossian, is filled with notions of rupture and displacement, instability, and fear of the erosion of identity. They have all exploited the use of different media to explore the relationship between false and true representations of events. Egoyan

features video as a mutable and fragile record of the past, something that can be altered or overlaid with false images as in *Family Viewing*, or that exposes what he calls ‘the selective process of memory’, as in *Calendar* (Desbarats, 1993:22). Torossian and Bastajian, in addition to Egoyan, highlight mediation of the narrative. Film-within-film, superimposed film, video, home movies, and still images provide a questioning counterpoint to their examinations of memory and identity.

Above all these concerns, however, the genocide and its associated repression and denial, shape much of the diasporan cinema. There is a sense of timelessness, almost the paralysis of trauma, where past events continue to infect the present. The psychological problems induced by the attempted extermination of the Armenian people reinforces cultural boundaries with outside communities, and the difficulty of crossing these boundaries is a repeated trope. But Egoyan, in concluding, seems to have noted the danger raised by Margalit of living always in memory of the dead. Tentatively, in *Calendar* and then more forcefully in *Ararat*, he advocates constructing a memorial to take the burden of remembering. Not to forget, but to forgive, is the way to create a new national narrative that avoids always looking to the past.

The autobiographical element of cinema in the Armenian diaspora would seem to confirm Naficy’s claim that this is a natural outcome of displacement (2001:34). As we have seen, it is a thread that connects Verneuil, Mamoulian, and Hagopian with Egoyan, Torossian, and Bastajian. However, his attribution of Egoyan’s accented style to exile and liminality, and his determination to seek commonality with a number of Kurdish and Palestinian film-makers is, perhaps, stretching the concept too far. In my analysis, the majority of these Armenian works are textured more by the continuing scar of the genocide, and the needs of film-makers to explore and understand their identity in a post-national context, than by the condition of ‘exile’. Whereas, in the Palestinian case, the accent is on the real and present issue of continued existence in the face of ethnic cleansing and cultural erasure. And the focus in the Kurdish case, which is the subject of the next two chapters, is the division of the nation and the homeland among different and competing states.