SONOROUS BORDERS: NATIONAL COSMOLOGY &
THE MEDIATION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN
ARMENIAN ETHNOPOP MUSIC

M.Sc. THESIS

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Conceptualizing nations as imagined communities raises the question how nations acquire their sense of self-evident reality and naturalness for those who claim their membership. In this study, Benedict Anderson’s interest in the role of media in the historical emergence of nationalisms is extrapolated to the localized audiovisual spectacles that characterize today’s global culture economy. The case of Armenia, a multilocal nation encompassing a post-Soviet state at unresolved political conflict with its neighbours as well as a large diaspora, demonstrates the repercussions of histories of violence and genocide on the popular culture that serves as a backdrop to the everyday lives of many of its members. The phenomenon of ethnopop, encompassing a pluriform array of musical genres that are routinely stylized with nationalist repertoires, serves as the point of entry from which debates on the role of music and media in the formation of bounded collectivities and the authentication of identificatory repertoires are explored.

By looking into the employment of mythico-historic themes in music videos, the ‘ethnophonic’ fetishization of musical instruments and the prominence of irredentist symbolism in Yerevan’s public space, the routine incorporation of troubled histories is shown to naturalize the essentialist identity project which frames Turkey and Azerbaijan as a categorical Other, while dramatizing the nation’s history of dispersion into a homeland and diaspora. Through redemptive consumption, televisual mnemotechnics and performances of primordialization, contemporary Armenia’s collective notions of national time and space are stretched far beyond their physical boundaries. On the other hand, the perceived appropriation of sonorous elements from Turkish and Azerbaijani musics in the subcultural phenomenon of rabiz leads to a politicization of taste in which everything that is considered problematic in today’s Armenia, ranging from a corrupted oligarchy to a purported ‘melodramatization of consciousness’, is deposited in the discursive container of rabiz.

Thus, while mythico-histories serve to unify Armenians by mobilizing the trope of an ‘endangered nation’ under collective trauma, the framing of rabiz ethnopop as ‘the Other within’ reveals the nation as internally divided and exposes national cosmology as artifice. In spite of this, the nation endures such ambiguity and tends to remain ‘incontestable’, since the unresolved nature of histories of genocidal violence and ethnonational conflict sanctify the nation as a moral category.

KEYWORDS Boundary politics, nationalism, mediation, music, collective memory.
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When I started my studies in social anthropology, I considered it a mere ‘side dish’ to my main courses in electronic music composition at the HKU. At the time, it was the support and encouragement of my parents, more than anything else, which enabled me to change the direction of my educational path once more. I am grateful to Ton Zwaan for stimulating my interest in Armenia, for making me aware of the need to ground my thoughts on culture in historical processes, and for his keen insight into the role of violence in shaping collective identities. Abovian Cultural Center in Den Haag has been invaluable as a meeting point where I have been able to get in touch with the Armenian community in the Netherlands. For literature recommendations, I am indebted to Levon Abrahamian, whom I only met briefly, but whose work I greatly admire, and Nour Ibrahim, who also inspired me to rethink the question how the nation ‘survives’ problematic social conditions and a loathed state. I thank my thesis supervisor, Mattijs van de Port, for kindling my interest in media anthropology, for his helpful and insightful comments on my thesis drafts, and his sincere attempts to temper my zest for totalizing theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

We had just seen the newly released *David of Sasun* animated feature, a rendition of the medieval Armenian national epic, when I left the auditorium with my two friends and found that someone was waiting for me in the foyer. I had not expected Hovo here, in Yerevan’s Kino Moskva theater, for I had brushed off his request to meet up earlier that day with the vague promise that I’d call him back after the movie. But now he was here – a calm boy from Gyumri, 26 years old, literate and intelligent, apparently very curious to meet me. Until this moment, we had only communicated through an online discussion forum dedicated to Armenian youth culture, and he wanted to know whether I would join a festive meeting of the internet community at one of its members’ homes. ‘They’ wanted to see whether I am real. Since I was the first *otar*\(^1\) (foreigner, non-Armenian) among several hundreds of active members, there was some disbelief regarding the likelihood of a non-Armenian writing in Armenian script having entered their digital world. Rumors had emerged online that I was fake, a mere impersonation pretending to be an ethnographer from Holland, and I was eager to prove them wrong.

While leaving the movie theater and re-entering the urban world of tufa stone architecture, my friends, both local Armenians from Yerevan, announced that they were not interested in joining me. So I suddenly found myself deserted, alone with Hovo. Upon grabbing a taxi with this vaguely familiar stranger, who seemed to be constantly calling other people to announce my presence, I felt a mixture of excitement and slight anxiety, as if kidnapped by a benevolent force.

The gathering was hosted in the apartment of one of the forum members, with vodka, beers and kebab shared plentifully. When it became clear to the persons present, around fifteen people all in their twenties, two thirds male and one third female, that I was occupied with an ethnographic research project with a special interest in patriotic pop songs and *rabiz* culture, a burst of spontaneous reactions broke loose. One person started a mocking discussion on who was the most *rabiz* (a genre of music that will be discussed later, but in this context meaning bad taste), tempting me to try eating the kebab that was on the table in spite of my vegetarian principles, simply because it, according to him, was the most *rabiz* Armenian food imaginable. Rustam was teaching me the proper way to sing the patriotic song *Msho Dashter* (‘Fields of Mush’), a song about the region of Mush that is currently in Turkey but the Armenianness of which is still glorified in many songs. A jubilant hand gesture, with a clenched fist, while stressing the word ‘sunbeam’ of the song’s opening words “A sunbeam suffused the fields of Mush” (*Msho dashter shoghn e patch*), turned out to be essential. A turbulent, lively and chaotic party atmosphere broke loose, with people singing fragments of songs, toasts being made to my research

\(^1\) All Armenian words have been rendered into the Latin alphabet using the *Armenian Review* transliteration guidelines, but I have retained established forms in common use for the names of persons and places. Thus, I write of Harout Pamboukjian rather than Harut Pambukchyan, and *duduk* player Gasparyan’s first name is rendered Djivan rather than Jivan.
project, and within a few minutes, out of nowhere appeared a yellow sticky note with handwritten lyrics to *Aryunot Drosh* (‘Blood-soaked Flag’), a revolutionary song which has been recorded in a panoply of versions ranging from children’s choir to electronic synthesizer pop, about a short-lived period of successful resistance against the Ottoman perpetrators of the Armenian genocide during World War I:

The blood-soaked flag of our independence,  
Was being waved against the tyranny,  
The heart of the Armenians filled with hope,  
Fright came over the emperor of the Ottomans.

The great murderer grew incredibly furious,  
He gave the command to eradicate the Armenians,  
To destroy Armenia, to erase the Armenian name,  
So that the tyranny would remain undamaged.

But with a weapon in their hand they stood on their feet,  
The freedom fighters (*fedayiner*), brave like lions.  
When the hero Andranik\(^2\) would wage war,  
Fear would rule over the Ottoman armies.

I had come to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, with the intention of looking into the political dimension of a wide spectrum of Armenian folkloristic and patriotic pop musics, which in the entirety of their multi-sensory manifestations I categorize under the umbrella term ‘ethnopop’. Armenian ethnopop can be broadly defined as an electronic keyboard backed, mass-produced pop music with national themes in its lyrical, musical and/or visual stylization. Its instrumentation often incorporates traditional Armenian folk instruments such as the *duduk* and *zurna*, whereas lyrics tend to be centered on the theme of *karot*, an Armenian word that signifies a mixture of nostalgia, longing and missing that can apply to either a person or a place. Due to the great variety of shapes the basic ethnopop formula may take, its popularity among all strata of the Armenian population is immense, encompassing a loose emic taxonomy of genres (e.g. *rabiż*, patriotic songs, *estradayin*) the boundaries of which often depend on the subjective taste of the listener. And yet, at the same time, many of its manifestations are simultaneously denounced by people of ‘good taste’ as being a dangerous, destructive, cheap, tacky and even anti-Armenian, foreign phenomenon.

As I gained access to various Armenian broadcasting outlets during my fieldwork, it became increasingly clear that the mediasphere of Armenia is abundantly devoted to articulating, commenting

\(^2\) Andranik Ozanian (1865-1927), military commander and ideologue for Armenian volunteer units, involved in a variety of guerrilla battles and campaigns against the Ottoman Empire and the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.
and defining Armenianness (*hayutyun*, a word commonly used to refer to the Armenian people as a whole). Not only a large part of the popular music industry, but also a wide range of TV-shows, radio programs, magazines and websites that fall within the scope of popular culture are incessantly concerned with discussing the Armenian nation, its traumatic history, its heroic survival, its cultural heritage and the relations between the minority of (± 3 million) Armenians living in the actual Republic of Armenia and its self-seceded exclave Nagorno-Karabakh (which is *de jure* part of Azerbaijan), and its much larger, globally dispersed diaspora (± 5 million). Unresolved conflicts with neighbouring countries often serve as a political backdrop to conversations about any topic, including music. The lack of recognition of the genocide of 1915 perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks, the imminent reopening of the border between Armenia and Turkey and continuing tensions over the frozen conflict over the disputed, *de facto* independent Armenian quasi-state in Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, provide the subject matter not just for political debate, but also for various patriotic songs and music videos. In talking with ethnopop critics and aficionados, I also witnessed much discussion and controversy on the perceived ‘Armenianness’ or ‘non-Armenianness’ of certain musical elements, such as the use of a melismatic singing style which is often associated with music from Islamic cultures, as opposed to the arch-Armenian *duduk*, a reed instrument with a melancholic timbre which is thought by most Armenians to epitomize their national music culture.

Another episode from recent history that has had a strong formative impact on today's Armenian popular culture is the fall of the Soviet Union, which made way for expressing an unrestrained nationalist euphoria in popular media, but also went accompanied with a series of social catastrophes that led to a whole new wave of emigration from the country, mainly to Russia and the West. A near-complete withdrawal of industry from Armenia, economic blockades from Turkey and Azerbaijan, a devastating earthquake and streams of refugees from Azerbaijan as a result of the war over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, led to an increase in poverty and a deterioration of living standards that has been described as a crisis of demodernization[^3] (Platz 2000). Subsequently, this series of social catastrophes forced as many as 1 out of 5 inhabitants to flee the country as labor migrants, and nowadays there seems to be at least one member working abroad in almost every family in Armenia (Ishkanian 2002). This is also highly relevant for my research since many song lyrics are written from the perspective of the émigré, describing the feelings of diasporan sorrow and nostalgia for the Armenian homeland. Hence, the impact and meaning of historical events on both the content of much of today's Armenian popular music and the predispositions of its audiences is one of the major points of entry from which I will scrutinize the relation between Armenian popular music and the nationalized imaginings of its devotees, denouncers and producers.

[^3]: This term is not meant to signify a step backwards in an ‘objective’ teleological timeframe, as is implied by the concept of modernity in the mundane eschatologies of modernization theory. Rather, ‘demodernization’ here refers to the concrete realities and *emic* experience of living without electricity and with a scarcity of food after several decades of relative prosperity in Armenia under the Soviet Union.
The central question I am engaged with in this study is as follows: What are the repercussions of histories of violence and genocide on the audiovisual representations the Armenian nation produces of itself, and how do these mediated forms affect the formation and authentication of national imaginings in its subjects? Several larger issues are related to this question. On the most general level, this study may be read as an inquiry into the relations between nationalism, music and media in a newly independent state in unresolved conflict with its neighbors. It is also concerned with an anthropological issue of boundary formation in which classic themes from Fredrik Barth (1969), stressing relationality over isolationist conceptions of culture, and Pierre Bourdieu, asserting that “every sort of taste … unites and separates” (1984: 56), converge, namely: what role does the politicization of taste play in policing the cultural/aesthetic borders between an ethnonational group and its Others? The overall picture that ultimately emerges from these questions is that of a multilocal nation that is much engaged with issues of national cosmology and collective memory in its popular culture. The political dimension of Armenian ethnopop music may serve, on the one hand, as a quasi-therapeutic means of dealing with tragic histories, providing the symbolic nuts and bolts of nation-formation, yet on the other hand the tight guarding of essentialist national imaginings and the endless perpetuation of victimhood narratives has a detrimental effect on the possibility of resolving the conflicts in the region. Indeed, although I intend to render the sometimes rabid forms of nationalism understandable and provide a sympathetic account of some of its mediated and ritualized expressions, this should not in any way be read as an apologetics for the politically counterproductive and psychologically limiting aspects that much of such extreme and categorical nationalist thinking implies.

The structure of my thesis is five-fold. In the remainder of this introduction, I will provide a general impression of the audiovisual domain of Armenian ethnopop music, reflect on the role of mediation in the formation and perpetuation of nationalism, while providing some necessary historical backgrounds and addressing matters of methodology and representation. The second chapter will be concerned with the impact of histories of genocidal violence and ethnonational conflict on the symbols and narratives of national cosmology as they appear in Armenian popular culture, viz. modes of televisual representation in music videos, the investment of national significance into sonorous elements, and the mythico-historical narratives embedded in the everyday material culture of Yerevan. The third chapter will treat the musical malleability of categories of national time and space, which I conceptualize as aesthetic attempts at cognitive closure in dealing with the tragedies of the genocide on the Armenians of 1915 and its concomitant loss of territories, and the disputed gain of territory in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war. The fourth chapter addresses the issue of aesthetic boundaries and Othering and the role the politicization of musical (and extra-musical) taste plays in processes of dichotomisation and internal fragmentation, while revealing the idealized univocality of the nation as artifice. The central chapters will be alternated by short theoretical interludes in which I seek to distil concepts of general socio-theoretical applicability from the case of Armenian ethnopop. In the
conclusion I will summarize the argument and contextualize it by devoting some attention to alternative conceptualizations of the nation that have recently appeared in Armenian popular culture, and which seek to infuse it with a different political agenda.

1.1. **The Nation as Mass Mediation**

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that the majority of the artists that are the subject of this study will have included a song named ‘Armenia’ or ‘My Armenia’ in their repertoires at some point in their musical careers. To mention only a few of the most popular ones, Alla Levonyan, Arman Hovhannisyan, Aram Asatryan, Bghdo, Hay Tgheq, Mihran, Sirusho and Tata Simonyan have all recorded a song under this title, rendering their lyrics and melodies into a personal ode to the nation. What is more, all these artists have produced music videos in which they enact their patriotism in audiovisual spectacles deeply saturated with national symbolism, which routinely appear on broadcasting channels transmitted to Armenian communities worldwide. Sometimes, in an unusual flight of poetic fancy, an artist may slightly alter the title to this standard form of ‘Armenia’-song with a personal touch, as is the case in ‘Jan [dear, darling] Armenia’ by Tatul Avoyan, incorporating a colloquialism of endearment that is suiting to his style of wedding pop, or ‘New Armenia’ by hiphop group H.A.Y.Q., expressing their hopes for a reunited Armenia to appear in the future.

The stylistic framework within which these national songs are articulated is indeed somewhat diverse, yet the subject matter of their lyrics and the markers of identity enacted in the music videos accompanying them show a remarkable homogeneity in all cases. I will quote the introductory verse to the last-mentioned song, by H.A.Y.Q., in order to provide a general sense of the lyrical content of a typical ‘Armenia’ ethnopop song:

> Whatever you may desire,  
> It's here in our Armenia.  
> Let's unite to show the world,  
> Let the world be amazed.  
> *Zurna, dhol*, giant mountains,  
> There is no other place.  
> Without our fatherland,  
> Our song has no meaning.  
> – H.A.Y.Q. – *Nor Hayastan* (‘New Armenia’)  

While these words are being uttered to a hip-hop rhythm with a melody on *zurna*, a shrill woodwind

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4 *Zurna* and *dhol* are Armenian folk instruments; respectively a folk oboe and frame drum.
instrument with a sound akin to the oboe, the accompanying music video shows a map of the current Republic of Armenia that slowly increases in size until it has reached the proportions of a territory known in the nation’s discourse as ‘Greater Armenia’, about six times the size of today’s republic, most of which has been depopulated of its Armenian population during the 1915 genocide. Pictures of monuments in Yerevan are held in front of the camera while a rapper shouts “Armenia … Yerevan …” Initially, the music video seems to be in black and white, but after some time the black and white turns out to have been merely a backdrop to increase the contrast with the red, blue and orange (or apricot-color, in the local patriotic lingo) Armenian flags that are being waved for much of the remainder of the video. The rappers and singer are dressed in fur coats, wearing trendy caps, sneakers and sunglasses, with various background actors dancing and waving the Armenian tricolor.

For the most part, the visual style is not unlike the global music video aesthetics that have been dominant ever since the inception of MTV – a curious mixture of capitalism and surrealism, with quick montages, flashing lights and signifying chains that, in their non-linearity and lack of directional narrative, evade any attempt at unambiguous cognitive closure. However, a clear patriotic element is inserted into the Anglo-American visual repertoire: images that appear for a split second include a still life snapshot of a fur coat with a glimmering cell phone and a watch with the Armenian tricolor on its display, and a young school boy who has written “Armenia, you are our hope” with chalk on a school board, gazing intently into the camera. Surely what is at stake here is a wholly contemporaneous attempt at styling the nation, although some of the substance of its symbolism and narrative is rooted in the maps of antiquity.  

Discovering several dozens of these ‘Armenia’-songs and music videos has been one of the initial impetuses for my ethnographic research on the interconnections between Armenian nationalism and popular music culture. Being exposed to many such mediated utterances as an outsider learning the Armenian language, at times watching patriotic music videos felt as if I was witnessing a kind of audiovisual internal monologue of a nation, a continual dreamlike commentary on the nation by the nation itself. Of course, such a perspective is as reifying as it is romantic, since it does not take into account either the politico-economic mechanisms that lead to the production of such spectacular representations of nationness, nor the interpretative predispositions and signifying work of the beholders who actually form the nation that is being symbolically enacted in the music videos. It is by taking such less apparent dimensions into account that an ethnographic approach may bring new insights to the study of media production and reception.

Perhaps surprisingly, not many of the ethnopop artists bringing musical odes to the nation

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5 Although six times as large as the current republic’s territory, the conception of a ‘Greater Armenia’ in the music video by H.A.Y.Q. is still remarkably small in comparison to the notion of a ‘sea-to-sea Armenia’ that is equally oft-referenced in Armenian popular culture, and which we will encounter in a later chapter. The proportions of the latter are derived from maps of a short-lived Armenian kingdom under Tigran the Great in the first century BC, which stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.
would be classified as being particularly ‘ultra-nationalistic’ or ‘hardline’ patriots within the mainstream discourse of Armenia. Rather, they form the gist of today's mainstream Armenian pop music, and provide the soundtrack to the everyday lives of anyone who is regularly exposed to Armenian media channels. Admittedly, most singers will also record many songs on themes common to the global standards set by Anglo-American popular music, especially romantic love, but even then it is extremely common to hear singers praise the specifically Armenian qualities of the objects of their romantic interest, or the typically Armenian condition of global dispersion preventing the union between lovers, and see a wide range of national symbols appearing in the music videos.

Having been instructed in theories of nationalism which stress the central role of media in the genesis of nations, such as the vernacular linguistic communities arising by means of print media in Benedict Anderson's notion of the *imagined community* (1991), these ‘media texts’ (i.e. songs, music videos, TV programs, radio discussions, events, magazines) led me to ponder the ways in which mediation operates in shaping form and content of today's nations. In the most abstract sense, mediation is one of the core mechanisms of shaping community at any time and place, for already at the most fundamental level of human interaction, any relation between two or more persons can be said to be mediated by their mutual imaginings of one another. Similarly, our faculty for language may be thought of as a medium transforming experiences into classificatory grids, providing us with the sounds, phantasms and gestures that serve to demarcate, represent and communicate boundaries between groups, be it through kinship or on the basis of religious or linguistic markers. Hence mediation can be considered a “general foundation of social life” (Mazzarella 2004) capable of producing notions of belonging on various scales long before the dawn of modern nationalism. The novelty of nationalism, then, lies in the way in which imaginings of belonging are extended beyond face-to-face contact and deflected towards phantasmal, large scale conceptions of a common history, territory and identity as to provide a sense of directionality to the everyday lives of all ‘nationalized’ people, albeit with varying intensity.

Indeed, since nationalism in its very essence is a phenomenon of the masses, arising concomitantly with modern political notions of citizenship and popular sovereignty (Panossian 2007), and the nation itself is a process and product of mass mediation, examining the relation between the nation and popular culture may prove indispensable to any attempt at analyzing its workings in today’s media-saturated world. For a nation to come into being, notions of collective belonging need not merely arise in the cultural production of an intellectual elite; they also needs to be distributed and bestowed with a felt sense of reality and naturalness to all those who claim membership to a nation. Furthermore, in order to survive, a nation need not merely be created by appropriating a common history or propagating a kind of symbolic kinship; it also has to be reproduced, perpetuated and/or transformed on a continual basis through the everyday practices of its members, if it is to subsist successfully. For this reason, it is not sufficient to study media texts that have a ‘nationalizing’ character.
on the level of discourse if we are to apprehend their significance in the construction and negotiation of identities; it also requires a critical examination of the signifying practices that accompany the reception of nationalizing mediated utterances and the production of localized meanings on a ground level. Thus it is at the intersection of audience studies in anthropology and debates concerning popular nationalism that this study aspires to provide a theoretical contribution.

1.2 A HISTORY OF DISPERSION AND MULTILOCALITY

As the political scientist Razmik Panossian (2007) has pointed out, Armenian nationalism has from its inception in the 17th and 18th centuries been a multilocal phenomenon, not led by a ‘nationalizing’ state since Armenians were divided between Ottoman, Russian and Persian empires, with a large merchant and clerical diaspora operating from cities as diverse as Venice, Lviv, Madras, Tbilisi and Isfahan. The eradication of Armenians from all the territories in Eastern Anatolia that had been inhabited by the ethno-religious and linguistic Armenian communities for many centuries, combined with the Sovietization of the small independent Armenian republic in the South Caucasus, finalized a long process of polycentric identity formation. Although there is only a few thousand Armenians left in the eastern provinces of Turkey, where there were an estimated 2 million less than a century ago, these regions in Eastern Anatolia are still known among Armenians as Western Armenia as opposed to Eastern Armenia, the current independent republic and Nagorno-Karabakh, which are located significantly further eastwards than most Armenian kingdoms that have existed throughout history.

As a result of the events of 1915, Western Armenian genocide survivors were dispersed throughout the Middle East, Europe and the US, stateless and organized by diaspora communities, speaking and writing the Constantinople version of the Armenian language, having their own political parties of which the nationalist and irredentist Dashnak party, or Armenian Revolutionary Federation, is the most important, with churches falling under the patriarchate of Antelias in Lebanon. Eastern Armenians, on the other hand, were mostly integrated into the Soviet Union, speaking the Yerevan dialect, undergoing various trajectories of Sovietization and Russification, with churches, in so far they were free to operate under communism, falling under the patriarchate of Ejmiatsin near Yerevan. What is important to note here, is that although this dual structure has largely operated and continues to operate in a parallel fashion, with different locales, languages, political parties and religious hierarchies, the Armenians of the diaspora and of the republic nevertheless continued to see themselves as an integral part of the same nation. What unifies the two is not necessarily the sharing of objective social structures, but rather primarily a subjective sense of belonging (ibid.).

It is precisely in this subjective sense of belonging, overcoding the concrete differences that exist between the manifold Armenian communities all over the world, that media have played a major role since Armenia's independence in 1991. Since the independent republic is much more accessible
now to people from the diaspora than Soviet Armenia ever was, interaction between the two has proliferated and the divisions between the two 'blocks' of nationhood have become less rigid and clean-cut than they were before the fall of communism. Many Armenians who grew up in Soviet Armenia have now become labor migrants in diaspora communities, traversing geographic distances while remaining in a mediated locus of deterritorialized Armenianess, whereas it is has become customary for second- and third-generation diasporans to go on secular pilgrimages to the newly independent homeland for holidays and/or short-term social work with ‘pan-Armenian’ charity organizations. Indeed, the republic has its own dedicated ministry of diaspora relations and with economic blockades along most of its borders, i.e. Turkey and Azerbaijan, it is largely dependent on investments from the diaspora for its economic sustenance.

To contemplate the complex interaction between the widely differing positions on the diaspora-homeland continuum and the experience of ethnopop media texts, one only needs to think of the variety of perspectives from which a patriotic ‘Armenia’-song may be experienced and the multisonant meanings potentially involved. Consider the following subject positions for the aforementioned music video: a native of Yerevan of the largely Russian-speaking intellectual elite, who has grown up under communism and nostalgically remembers the relative wealth and careless life of times before the social catastrophes that accompanied the transition to post-communist independence, may listen to the lyrical content of such a song with a degree of cynicism and even bewilderment, for s/he may consider independence only a nominal phenomenon that made everyday life harder and more troublesome, whereas her/his children who have grown up during the period of nationalist hurrahs of the independence movement and the Karabakh war are more likely to consider such overt expressions of nationalist discourse a normal aspect of everyday life. A recent settler to Yerevan whose family grew up in the diaspora, who has difficulty connecting to the post-Soviet habitus of the average inhabitant of Yerevan and is living mainly in a community of repatriates, may find a sense of communion in such songs that is more difficult to achieve in everyday life. A labor migrant from the Armenian republic working in Russia to provide her/his family with an income may sense a nostalgia for family and friends in the homeland, whereas a third-generation diasporan in California who never went overseas and has only a rudimentary knowledge of the Armenian language may construct a wholly deterritorialized sense of belonging out of such a song, with a nostalgia for a place that is known from a multitude of stories but never actually visited.

As we will see in a later chapter, even for those Armenians whose family has lived in the republic since its founding in the late 1910s, notions of being Western or Eastern Armenian can be quite mixed, since the republic was from its onset largely constituted by genocide survivors seeking

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6 During Soviet times, Russian language schools were considered of a better quality than Armenian language ones, and although it is rare to find Armenians in the republic that do not speak Armenian, for many people Russian (or a mixture of Russian and Armenian) is still the preferred language for domestic contexts.
protection from Turkish onslaughts by courtesy of the Eastern Armenians who had lived in the Russian Empire. The issue of genocide recognition, although first ritualized on a mass scale on its 50th annual memorial in Yerevan in 1965, has for several decades been most heavily politicized by the diaspora communities which are themselves largely a product of the genocide. In recent years, however, it has also become a much more prominent issue in the republic and its neglect has led to much problems for its political leadership, with tens of thousands of Armenians in diaspora communities worldwide protesting the signing of a protocol to open borders with Turkey in late 2009. Media conglomerations from the republic are broadcasting via satellite to diaspora communities throughout the world, which is leading to Eastern Armenian slowly becoming the lingua franca for Armenians worldwide at the cost of the Western dialect, and yet there are also many broadcasting channels operating from the diaspora, some of them still in Western Armenian. Some TV companies, such as the Shant network, have separate channels for the Armenian republic and the American diaspora, and indeed when watching the diaspora channel one will find a mixture of soap operas produced in the republic interspersed with commercials for Armenian jewelers, lawyers and car businesses located in Los Angeles and Glendale, an L.A. suburb that has become affectionately known as ‘Little Armenia’.

The opening up of the Armenian republic to the diaspora since independence has also led to an increased flow of material culture and media artifacts between the two, with ethnopop singers continually going on tour in the diaspora, performing at community centers and weddings, and with Armenian shops throughout the world distributing their cassettes, CDs, and DVDs. Similarly, for economic reasons, a large part of the CDs by local singers from the Armenian republic that one will find in Yerevan music shops, although recorded in Armenia, are also actually pressed and produced by diasporan companies in the US. These are just some indications of the complex transnational matrix within which nearly all aspects of Armenian cultural life are entangled, both in terms of ideational content (e.g. genocide recognition) and in the practical sense of production, distribution and consumption. Indeed, the entirety of Armenian ethnopop music is implicated in a complex network of psyche, physique and place, in which spatial representations in media text content are syncopated by globetrotting ethnopop singers and producers in a variety of audience loci, and it is only in analyzing the intersection of these three levels that one can fully grasp how a variety of subjective senses of Armenianness may be produced while retaining its identificatory attachment to the same imagined community. Thus, the history of multilocality and dispersion continues in nearly every aspect of Armenian life to this very day, with repercussions of Ottoman genocidal violence and the formation of a diaspora that is larger than the republic on the one hand, and post-Soviet social catastrophes

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7 The differences between the two dialects are mainly of a grammatical and idiomatic nature and a different pronunciation for several letters, with vocabularies being largely shared. Inter-dialect comprehension can, however, be problematic since Eastern Armenian is written using a rationalized orthography developed under Soviet rule, which makes the literature of the Western dialect rather difficult to read for someone not accustomed to its more erratic traditional orthography.
(undeclared war with Azerbaijan, mass labor migration, lack of reconstruction after the 1988 earthquake, economic impoverishment) on the other, as oftentimes problematic determinants in the fields of the cultural imaginary and practical physical mobility.

1.3. **NOTES ON REPRESENTATION AND METHODOLOGY**

This is a study that “remakes, re-presents other representations” (Marcus 1990: 7). It makes use of pre-existing narrative productions to produce its own narrative, aware of the “complex matrix of dialogic engagement with diverse other representations, interests, and claims to knowledge concerning the same objects of study” (ibid. 5). Indeed, it may be said that the musical and audiovisual phenomena under scrutiny here are themselves the expression of a native ‘ethnographic imagination’. Clearly, many a producer of ethnopop has studied her/his country’s national history, observed its people and material culture, and had conversations with knowledgeable interlocutors, ultimately leading to the production of a particular representation of the nation. We may thus consider the production of ethnopop music videos a kind of emic audiovisual anthropology, which raises certain epistemological questions regarding the qualitative differences between these media texts and my study of their role in Armenian society. Rather than reducing ethnography to a genre of fiction merely employing a plethora of shrewd rhetorical devices and authorization strategies to hierarchically transcend the perspectives of its objects of study, I propose that there is indeed a qualitative difference between the two, in the sense that this study is not an attempt to aestheticize a nation for an audience of national subjects, but rather an outsider’s politicizing ‘metacritique’ of these self-portrayals for the community of academia. Nevertheless, it will prove valuable to keep taking into account the peculiar resemblances between the etic study of a nation’s mediated imaginings and the emic ethnopop utterances articulating the purported identities of this nation, in the sense that ultimately both are quintessentially ‘ethnographic’, i.e. *people-portraying*, modes of narrative production, each involved its own strategies of persuasion.

Following John Fiske and John Hartley’s study of the semiotic dimensions involved in ‘reading’ television (2003 [1978]), I will be stressing the ‘bardic’ aspects of mass mediated utterances in their intersection with a variety of social contexts. Besides clarifying how television works as a predominantly oral medium condensating social concern into a mediated centre, the bardic metaphor may serve to further elucidate the relationship between the subject and object of this study, since anthropologists themselves have sometimes been described as bardic mediators. One such attribution of bardic qualities to anthropologists can be found in the concept of the ethnographer as griot (Stoller 1994). Stoller recounts how, in studying the wandering musician-poets of the Sahel known as griots, anthropologists themselves have been judged by their interlocutors in the field by the standards of griotic representation. In particular, producers of ethnographic film such as Jean Rouch have been both lauded and criticized by locals in West Africa in griotic terms, for the extent to which they have
managed to give a voice to history and expose the “dynamic tension between the poetic and the political” (ibid. 358) that exists in society. Much like poststructuralist theories in literary criticism celebrating the ‘death of the author’, which have also been championed by anthropologists after the reflexive turn in ethnographic writing, the griot is never considered an autonomous subject in full control of his narrative weaving, but rather a point of mediation where voices of history meet and find new political and aesthetic expressions. “Griots are at the center of a swirl of discordant voices. They use these voices to creatively craft their tales. The “old words” consume them, but not completely.” (ibid. 359)

Similarly, I will not defer the agency and responsibility for my writing to socio-historical forces, as an ironic reading of radical constructivism may imply, but I will try to embed the voices I have collected in the field into the choir of social theorists under my direction with a proper regard for the role history has played in the formation of today’s Armenian nation. The aim here is to supplement both academia and the field with a bardic perspective that is betwixt and between, a voice ultimately neither wholly attributable to the author, nor to the subjects being represented in her/his study, where the intersection of media texts and socio-historical context are complemented by my own theoretical imagination to produce points which are “not wholly derivable from the field but vital to conceptualizing its relationships” (Willis 2000: xi).

Taking George Marcus’ encouragement of incorporating cinematic modes of representation into a modernist aesthetics of ethnographic writing (1990) into account, and combining it with the aesthetics of much ethnopop music videos, I propose to synthesize the griotic view of ethnographic representation with the cinematic metaphor of montage into a concept of ‘bardic montage’ as a stylistic metaphor to organize my writing. My ideal would be that this study reads somewhat like a home-recorded VCR tape, on which fragments of songs and music videos have been carefully organized and juxtaposed with my own recordings of social reality, connecting their disparate elements into an alternative order which I find to be most elucidating for addressing my research questions. The reasons for such an approach are several. Since this is an ethnography of cultural processes of mass mediation rather than an attempt at naturalistically portraying a delineated locale or small-scale social group, my research methodology has needed to address several levels simultaneously – both inside and outside ethnographic ‘real time’. Indeed, my interpretations are the result of a constant shifting from the collection and analysis of media texts, to observing their reception in a variety of ethnographic contexts, and participating in any social setting which either implicitly or explicitly could serve to elucidate their role in contemporary Armenian society. As such, my research project has been as much of an improvisatory and impressionistic nature as any ethnographic endeavour ultimately is; at the very least ‘circular-reiterative’ in its undulating movement from semi-structured observation/data collection to the sudden insights that emerge from unplanned and unexpected social interaction or media contemplation. But in a media-saturated environment, social reality itself is equally disjunctive,
constantly shifting between varying levels of mediation for every actor. Hence, incorporating the cinematic metaphor of montage into ethnographic writing may help in communicating both the nature of the audiovisual popular culture that is the object of this study and the movements in mediated and physical time and space that have led me to my theoretical analyses.

In order to ground the instantaneous, haphazard impulses of everyday participant observation in a thoroughly informed theoretical and historical framework, my starting point for this study has been an analysis of the symbolism of a dozen ethnopop music videos, after having acquainted myself with the Armenian language to the level of semi-fluency. During my stay in Yerevan, I continued to take language lessons, which combined with looking into the cultural history of the Transcaucasus region and trying out theories of nationalism and media, allowed me to feed back the more improvisatory aspects of fieldwork into the general themes that emerged from these preparatory studies. In the end, my three months in Armenia included attending concerts, dinners and a neopagan gathering, many exploratory strolls through Yerevan’s urban cityscape, plus interviews and conversations with a variety of interlocutors including ethnopop aficionados, artists, a music video director and various critics. For the entirety of this period, I shared a flat in Yerevan with two rabiz ethnopop enthusiasts from rural Armenia, who taught me much about their everyday struggles for simply getting by, and with whom I spent many hours listening to their favourite songs from their cell phones and analysing music videos on TV.

If ever there was a problem of completeness in ethnographic research, it is surely there in a largely ‘non-local’ study like this. Indeed, while dancing to rabiz wedding pop songs playing from the cell phone of one of my flatmates, joined by his sister and friends from a fisher town near Lake Sevan and the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, I could find myself wondering whether any mediated spatialities were being imagined here in even the most implicit sense, and indeed seriously doubted whether any of the nationness that I was looking for was being produced in a domestic situation like this. And if during interviews my interlocutors started telling me about “We, the Armenians,” summing up an essentialist view of collective identity for me, I wondered to what extent this narrative production had been solely the result of my foreign presence. And yet, the totality of such experiences, fed into my theoretical framework and triangulated with observations from the field, friends, media and literature, convinces me that I am not ‘reading too much’ into trivial things.

Since music, especially the music enjoyed by the masses, is not generally considered a vehicle of meaning, sensuous rather than signifying uses tend to figure at the foreground for most casual listeners. What I hope to show is that there is a narrative dimension to those emotions we habitually conceive of as most ‘interior’, that they are forms of engagement with social reality and history rather than individual manifestations within a detached sphere of aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, besides the obvious realm of musical meaning that is found in song lyrics, I hope to demonstrate in the case of Armenian ethnopop that there are “many different kinds of meaningfulness, incarnate in different
practices and forms, layered and overlapping, connecting up in complex ways.” (Willis 2000: 22). The next chapter will touch upon the reverberations of Armenian history on both the form and content of ethnopop music and the predispositions of its audiences in the production of such kinds of such meaningfulness.
2. NATIONAL COSMOLOGY AND THE TERROR OF HISTORY

The historical narratives and symbolism of Armenian nationalism as they appear in various guises as sensuous carriers of national cosmology in the subject, ethnopop music, and the setting, the city of Yerevan, of my research, form the subject of this chapter. Many books have been written on the history of the Armenians from historiographical perspectives, including the tragic issue of the Armenian genocide about which it is surely important to continue stressing that indeed, it did occur, and indeed, it does confirm to the legal definition of genocide adopted by the UN\(^8\), whatever virtual realities the denialist position of Turkish officialdom may strive to create. Nevertheless, my aim here is not to represent or enter the oftentimes politicized debates about history ‘as it really was’. Rather, instead of opting for the detached bird eye’s gaze of a non-perspectivist approach or the mendacious manipulations of the nationalist academic, my focus here lies with the subjective dimension of the contemporary popular culture manifestations that have arisen from the objective flow of historical events that is being studied by historians.

I will focus mainly on the form and content of sensuous carriers of national symbolism here, interspersed with reflections on the role of traumatic history in shaping them, which is a prerequisite to gaining a deeper understanding of how they operate in a more substantive sense in the production of Armenian nationness today. After exploring the incorporation of historical narratives and symbolism into music videos, sonorous elements, and the everyday material culture of Yerevan, a theoretical interlude will lay the groundwork for exploring how and to what extent these manifestations may manage to establish a resonance with embodied subjects embedded in ethnographic realities in the formation and authentication of nationalized imaginings. I seek to realize the latter by making a comparison between the role of media in nationalism and religion. As we will see, these categories need not be treated as if they are governing completely separate domains of human experience once we view them as the social organization of myth-symbol complexes, seeking to render the processes of mediation upon which they depend invisible through engagements with sensational forms and Durkheimian states of collective effervescence.

2.1. MYTHICO-HISTORIC MUSIC VIDEOS

For a state of its size and population, Armenia has a remarkable amount of media broadcast outlets. The average household in Yerevan has access to at least 10 channels broadcasting mainly in the Armenian language, not to mention the plethora of Russian channels. Whenever I had the opportunity

\(^8\) See, e.g., the International Association of Genocide Scholars. http://www.genocidescholars.org/
to engage in TV channel surfing, it felt like the remote control to the television set provided access to a veritable microcosm of Armenian national cosmology. Taking into account the centrality of media in the formation of imagined communities, while exploring these channels indeed I sometimes imagined that I was overhearing the enervated pulse of the throbbing heart of the nation, albeit through a filter of market forces and political constellations. Popular channels have patriotic names like ‘Fatherland’ and ‘Ararat’, the mountain just across the current border with Turkey on which Noah's Ark has landed according to tradition. Interludes announcing the transition from program content to commercial breaks are accompanied by synthesizer renditions of the national anthem and other patriotic songs such as Barov Yekar Sirun Krunk (‘Welcome back, beautiful crane’), a nostalgic, allegorical song about a crane returning to its nest with news from the diaspora. It is a mediascape with little space for critical voices. As has been shown in critical studies of the country’s media, television is decidedly unfree with cautious self-censorship, biased licensing commissions and the control of media outlets by oligarchs with links to the dominant political powers leading to a situation where there is nominally free enterprise allowing for a potential polyphony of voices, but in practice resulting in a strong uniformity and homogeneity with little space for voices of dissent (see Kurkchiyan 2006).

To provide an impression of the character of the local televisual mediascape, I will share a fragment of the notes I made while changing channels haphazardly in my flatmates’ room one evening, focusing on content with a decidedly national character:

A patriotic talent showcase features a young boy who has memorized the birth dates of dozens of famous Armenian writers. The crowd applauds and is getting increasingly excited with each correct answer provided. // A teenage girl sings a song about Javakhq, a region in Georgia in which Armenians form the ethnic majority, and which, according to one graffiti I spotted outside the Republic Square metro station, “is not Georgia.” The song is written by the singer’s father and in the interview afterwards the girl tells the viewers how important it is to realize that the region, although located in Georgia, is not a diaspora community, for the Armenians have always lived there and will remain there forever, fighting for the survival of their national culture. // A multimedia theatre performance on the history of the Armenian language is screened, with recitations of patriotic poetry, computer projections of mount Ararat, and electronic sound effects, rendering the invention (or ‘revelation’) of the Armenian alphabet into a contemporary spectacle. “And then in the 5th century, when our alphabet was finished, the gospel was translated to Armenian. And God spoke Armenian,” thus recounts the narrator.

As much as such bite-size snippets of televisual stochastics seemed to organize themselves into a semiotic cobweb of great symbolic significance to me, my flatmates Artashes and Garo usually did not see anything extraordinary in such mediated articulations of nationness. They were more astonished with my academic interest in such seemingly trivial matters, telling me that I would be much better off
to visit old monasteries or visit the museum of medieval manuscripts than pretend to be engaged in research by making notes while eating lavash flatbread and fried potatoes with them on the couch. Television, to them, was first and foremost a means of entertainment, the medium in itself not having (or being, in the McLuhanian sense) much of a message. Documentaries on the architecture of medieval Armenian churches in Eastern Anatolia (i.e. modern day Turkey), music videos claiming Nagorno-Karabakh as an essentially Armenian homeland, or patriotic game shows with jury members dressed in military uniform seemed as much a natural component of an everyday remote controlled tour through the televisual realm to them as Latin-American telenovelas (soap operas) dubbed in Armenian and Hollywood blockbusters dubbed in Russian. Their most common backdrops for conversation were music videos, be they Armenian ethnopop songs or Russian prison songs\(^9\), which are both broadcast on TV and distributed through DVDs that can be bought in local record stores, and are also sometimes given away for free as promotional material with magazines on pop culture.

It is the role and representation of history in Armenian ethnopop music videos to which I would like to draw some attention now, since they are mini-dramas exceptionally saturated with symbolism, simultaneously engaging several senses with their mixtures of music, lyrics, acting and imagery. Somewhat to my initial surprise, their overt patriotic audiovisual contents were left largely unaddressed by my informants unless I intervened to ask questions about them. If I asked Artashes, Garo and their friends why Armenians are recording songs and music videos about fedayi freedom fighters who lived a century ago, or why the songs we witnessed were stressing the specifically Armenian qualities (most typically sev-sev acher; deep dark eyes) of their objects of romantic interest so routinely, the answers were usually along the lines that this is simply what Armenians want to see and hear because they are Armenian, because every people needs an environment reflecting its national character in order to feel comfortable and at home. It is their being treated as a mundane televisual backdrop by most Armenians I met, whereas their contents often seemed quite rabid in its nationalism to me, which makes it worth exploring music videos here for some length.

As already noted in the introduction, ethnopop music videos can be seen as the distant, mass mediated kin of the ethnographic film, produced by highly selective and subjective ‘folk ethnographers’ whose audiovisual representations of an ethnos are, of course, staged and regulated by demands of audiences and markets rather than those of a scientific community, but nevertheless ethnographic in portraying an ethnos. In his *Tropics of Discourse*, the influential philosopher of history Hayden White has argued that any transformation of historical ‘data’ into discourse is necessarily so achieved by a strategic use, consciously or unconsciously, of tropes. A specific understanding of history “proceeds by the exploitation of the principal modalities of figuration,” (1978: 5), in which the specific style of emplotment used to organize ‘the facts’ into a narrative inevitably produces a concomitant set of ideological

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\(^9\) A musical genre known as chanson, or blatnaya pesnya, portraying life in the underworld and often romanticizing the elevated moral standards of convicts whose ethics is ‘above the law’.
implications (ibid. 70). A similar argument can be made for the audiovisual organization of historical data into ethnopop music videos. Here, to acquaint the reader with the modes in which history is portrayed in Armenian popular media, I distinguish between three kinds of Armenian mythico-historic styles: *nostalgic*, *tragic* and *heroic*. A specific music video may tap into the stylistic repertoire of all three modes of televisual representation, but here I will focus on examples that epitomize the characteristics of one particular mode with their semiotic implications for narrative production.

I invoke the notions of national cosmology and mythico-history because, much like the Hutu refugees in Tanzania studied by Liisa Malkki (1995), these audiovisual portrayals invoke the past in a manner in which “protagonists are categorical, and they are attributed essential, constitutive characteristics,” involving “claims about the categorical order of the world in a ... fundamental sense” (ibid. 244). Here, I am also reminded of the work of Michael Taussig who has pointed to histories of genocidal violence in Latin America as underlying potent sites of mythic production (1987). Indeed, like the yagé montages of shamanic rituals in Colombia, the engagement with the past we are witnessing in Armenian mythico-historic music videos is “not history understood as the passage of time ... but history as an opposition in meaning that the passage of time marks and about which the victors and the vanquished of history array their cosmos” (Taussig 1987: 374) – in the Armenian case, the distant offspring of those who vanquished during the genocide contesting the present of its perceived victors, the passage of national time marked by the perpetrators’ persistent denial. Much like these authors, I am using the notion of myth here not as an opposition to history ‘as it really was’. Rather, I adopt the concept of mythico-history in order to portray the ways in which producers of Armenian popular culture are coping with both the objective flow of historical events, such as the genocidal violence of 1915 and the ethnoterritorial conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the interpretations among Armenians and contestations in Turkey and Azerbaijan of these events in the present.

My intention here is thus twofold: first of all, to acquaint the reader with some key symbols of the nation and its history that are routinely packed into the media texts of Armenian ethnopop, and secondly, to demonstrate the diversity of ways in which elements of national cosmology may be synthesized to form different styles of mythico-historic narratives, each with its own subjective feel and narrative flow, appealing to different audiences with their own sentiments and predispositions.

### 2.1.1. **Nostalgic:** Dispersion, Reunion and the ‘Interior Touristic Gaze’

The vast majority of Armenian music videos with a patriotic theme can be classified as nostalgic in its mode of visual representation. They are mainly produced in the Armenian republic for the local broadcasting market, but they also target the diaspora, such as in the annual Telethon anthems commissioned by the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund that seek to raise money in the diaspora for development projects in the republic. Such videos tend to look at the nation from a perspective I
would describe as an ‘interior touristic gaze’. That is to say, they present the multilocal nation as a “culture-bearing unit” (Barth 1969: 11) by looking within the borders of its state, picturing singers and musicians surrounded by all the ‘must-sees’ of Armenian national heritage, nature and material culture. Popular locations for filming are medieval churches, mountain slopes and summits, the landlocked country’s only major water reserve Lake Sevan, and monuments commemorating national heroes and battles. Other habitually pictured elements are medieval cross-stones (khachqars) and illustrated religious manuscripts, the interior art of old churches, the lighting of candles within these churches, and fruit trees bearing the 'national' fruits – apricot and pomegranate. Mount Ararat, for many Armenians the paramount symbol of their nation, but nowadays located 30 km across the closed border with Turkey and thus symbolizing the tragedy of the ‘split condition’ between homeland, historically inhabited lands and diaspora, is perhaps the single most habitually pictured element in any nostalgic video.

To characterize the nostalgic televisual style, I will describe the music video for another archetypal song named Hayastan (‘Armenia’), this one by Bghdo, a rabiz singer also known by his full name Baghdasar Harutyunyan. It starts as follows:

The bright blue skyline of a metropolis with dozens of towering skyscrapers is wrapped in rapidly moving white clouds. // An airplane ascends into the sky. // Mountainous highlands appear from an airplane window. // The snowy twin peaks of mount Ararat appear in sight. // The plane lands at Yerevan’s Zvartnots airport. (22 sec., soft fades)

Bghdo’s song for the nation is highly celebratory in its mood, for it symbolically enacts a reunion of the diaspora with its fatherland. The folk instrument it uses is the zurna, a shrill folk oboe associated with weddings, and the musical mood is an up-tempo 6/8 dance. The lyrics are as follows:

You've come to Armenia, let me take your pain.
Come, let's spread a good feast (supra) table,
Let’s fill the cups with the wine of Ararat,
And drink to our Armenian mothers.

Let’s spread a feast table,
Let’s play the zurna and dhol,
Let's spread our forefathers’ dances,
All over the world.

May the bread at your mother's home remain forever abundant,
And the smoke from her hearth ascend to the heavens.
Let a house be built by the hands of the young,
Where the wandering (gharib) Armenian may return.
The video is a veritable tour d’horizon of national cosmology, the elements of which are cobbled together as a nostalgic series of associations. We see how traditional Armenian lavash flatbread is made in a village, baked on the sides of a cylindrical tonir oven. A bus is shown moving from one medieval church in a scenic mountain landscape to another, to show the diasporan returnees their fatherland. Young women are dancing and smiling, wearing red and blue folkloristic costumes. A young girl is shown eating a freshly picked apricot. Men are shown barbecuing kebab meat on skewers (khorovats) outdoors. The singer Bghdo, well in his forties and wearing a casual red polo shirt over his potbelly, is seen singing in front of picturesque waterfalls and riversides. It is not exactly clear who has come to Armenia and for what purpose, as different visitors are shown in different locations, but this need not matter for they are not framed as particular individuals but as general embodiments of the diasporan category. The montages follow their own logic of non-linear association, independently of the lyrics, until the whole repertoire of national symbols has been exposed.

The mythico-historical dimension of the narrative can be found in the fact that the visitors from the diaspora and the Armenians from the homeland welcoming them are framed as categorical protagonists for a utopian reunion between these two main categories of Armenianness, and the very need for such a reunion is primarily the result of the 1915 genocide and the social catastrophes following the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus, in the music video the drama of dispersion, so constitutive of modern Armenian culture, is jubilantly ‘solved’. And yet, in reality, almost no Armenians currently living in the West will make the step to ‘return’ to this post-Soviet country whose culture they’ve somehow inherited but never actually lived in. Thus the house built “by the hands of the young” for their compatriots from abroad would in reality most likely be a holiday home, the virtual repatriates the song invokes moving back to Los Angeles or France after a few weeks.

The music video for another popular nostalgic song, also called ‘Armenia’, but with the ethnonym in Russian (Armeniya), a duet by Tata Simonyan and Anatoly Dneprov, starts with almost the exact same sequence of an airplane leaving distant lands, mount Ararat appearing, and landing in Armenia. Here, too, old churches and folkloristic costumes are shown. But the mood of this song is one of karot, an impossible nostalgic longing, instead of celebration, and thus the duduk, a more plaintive woodwind associated with funerals instead of weddings, is employed and the rhythm of the song is slow, lacking syncopation. The chorus is sung, in Russian:

And behind you, Ararat, my Armenia
I know, mother, mother Armenia, you’re waiting for me.

If we represent the usage of musical elements in these two songs in a structuralist analysis as a superimposition of binary dichotomies, viz. zurna : wedding : union : celebration :: duduk : funeral :
dispersion: mourning, all kinds of interesting connections appear, which can be even extrapolated to
shrill: loud :: tender: soft for the sonic timbre of the instruments used. But what is even more
important is to see how the two poles are interrelated and form an integrated mythic repertoire or
‘grammar’ of nostalgia, much as a euphoric love song and a tragic break-up song can be seen as two
sides of the same socio-mythical coin. In his up-tempo zurna song, Bghdo is obviously on the euphoric
side of the dispersion/reunion spectrum, whereas Tata Simonyan and Anatoly Dneprov are singing
from the melancholic perspective with their slow duduk song. Together these sides form the nostalgic
mode of representation in Armenian ethnopop songs.

2.1.2. Tragic: Staging the Other, or, the Audiovisual Stylization of Victimhood

Overtly victimizing music videos, which develop the trope of the ‘endangered nation’ in a visual
manner to an extreme degree, are much less common than nostalgic ones. Fatalism is more readily
found in sentimental love songs, which will be treated in a later chapter, than in mythico-historic ones
with national themes. Songs with references to the genocide, independence struggle and Karabakh war
in their lyrics are more often approached from a hero viewpoint than from a tragic one. The two may,
like the reunion/dispersion pair in the nostalgic mode, seem intricately related, but I will treat them
separately here, since these two ‘tropings’ (White 1978) do imply a rather different cosmology,
especially in terms of a political worldview. Popular singers from the republic’s ethnopop canon who
regularly perform songs that directly concern political relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan include
Andre, Alla Levonian and Ruben Sasuntsi. In other cases, such as the video that will be described here,
they are by singers with a clear political affiliation to the Dashnak party, or Armenian Revolutionary
Federation, who regularly perform on meetings of this political party, the largest in the diaspora and
third largest in the republic. Their songs, however, are also popular among patriots who are not
necessarily partisan to the Dashnak political program of staunch irredentism (e.g. reclamation of lands
that have now been in Turkey for almost a century), since the Dashnak fedayi freedom fighters of the
late 19th century which their songs glorify are almost universally celebrated as saints in pan-Armenian
culture, and the First Armenian Republic (1918-1920) is seen as largely a Dashnak achievement.

Tragic music videos seek to frame Armenia as a wretched, but moral nation with hostile,
immoral neighbor nations, continuing to suffer from trauma as a result of the genocide. Rather than
portraying an ‘interior’ culture, the nation is framed in relational, ‘inter-national’ terms here. Such
narratives are especially potent in times of crisis or perceived threat, such as the imminent border
opening with Turkey during my stay, and seem to resonate well with the predispositions of Armenians
living in the diaspora who fight for genocide recognition in their ‘host’ countries. But I have been told
repeatedly that if I had visited Armenia during the times of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, I would
have been able to see mainly videos from tragic and heroic perspectives on public television in the
republic instead of today’s largely nostalgic trend.

In the music video I will treat here, *Hrant Dink* by Nersik Ispiryan, the singer is filmed having morning coffee in his diasporan home in Glendale, a suburb of Los Angeles home to over 50,000 Armenians. The story enfolds as follows:

The walls are decorated with an old black and white photo of Armenian freedom fighters. Melancholic *duduk* music is playing in the background. After the singer finishes reading his newspaper, he switches on the TV to watch the Armenian news. // After telling about a planned meeting between Armenian president Kocharyan and Vladimir Putin, the newsreader suddenly interrupts the program for a special announcement:

*Fellow compatriots, we’ve just received some sad news. Turkey’s intolerant climate has once again led to a bloody outcome. In the evening of Friday, the 19th of January, while leaving the editorial office of Agos newspaper [in Istanbul], [Armenian] journalist and famous dissident Hrant Dink was murdered. Unknown armed persons have fired four bullets of which, according to the police report, two hit his head.*

Thus far, everything in the music video corresponds to an event that might have very well happened, for the Armenian journalist and genocide recognition activist Hrant Dink was indeed tragically assassinated by a Turkish young nationalist in Istanbul in early 2007. But now let us return to the video to see the mythico-historic turn Nersik Ispiryan’s musical portrayal of this tragic event takes:

The singer puts his hands on his forehead and lowers his head, signaling shock and disbelief. He immediately switches off the television and walks to the piano, where he starts to compose an instant ode to the assassinated journalist and genocide recognition activist. The screen fades to black. // Nersik reappears, having changed his clothes from white to black, while drums and bass accompany the melancholic *duduk* melody from the intro. A picture of the Hagia Sophia appears, pierced by three bullets leaving a blood trail. He starts singing his instant ode, his face filmed in front of a black background:

*In Istanbul, through the hand of the Turk, a precious life was sacrificed.*
*The heart of whom was praying for peace to the world.*
*That brave boy was Hrant Dink, an advocate of justice.*
*Through his glory and his deeds he will continue to live on in history.*

*In the whole world the bestial acts of the Turk shall not be forgotten.*
*In the heart of the Armenian, it has left incurable deep wounds.*
*The beast’s never-ending thirst for the Armenian’s blood still isn’t saturated.*
*From century to century, this blind world just doesn’t see the Armenian’s sorrow.*
This narrative offers no closure, no restoration of a state of equilibrium or intact order; it even seems to suggest that such a closure is impossible as long as ‘the Turk’ continues massacring innocent Armenians. Indeed, eventually the singer is filmed with black and white footage of death marches and piles of corpses projected behind his head, thus framing the assassination of an Armenian journalist in Istanbul not as the atrocious act of a disturbed individual, but as a seemingly inevitable continuation of the 1915 genocide. It distributes a mass mediated form of “that space of death where reality is up for grabs” (Taussig 1987: 9) and its miasmas of terror through which a Manichean dichotomization is realized – ‘the Turk’ mythico-historically typecast as a categorical Other and eternal genocide perpetrator. Here one is reminded of Mary Douglas’ (1982) analysis of body symbolism and witchcraft cosmology: lacking a moral human interior, ‘their’ body is described as having only aggressive hands and the teeth of a cannibal, feeding on the blood and heart of ‘our’ moral we-group. The fact that thousands of Turkish citizens went to the streets the day after Hrant Dink’s assassination proclaiming that “We are all Armenians” is left out of the story, arguably because its inclusion would disclose a shared humanity behind this essentialist project of categorical Othering, shunning its taxonomic grid of good and evil ‘kinds’ of humans.

It must be added that this particular media text is something of a fringe product within the audiovisual domain of Armenian ethnopop and I am including it to exemplify the most extreme end of the tragic mode of televsional mythico-history. One patriotic singer I interviewed who doesn’t hesitate to sing of “the dog Turks” in his songs, admitted that he does not feel any grudge towards Turks in general, only towards their denialist government. None of the young people I’ve met during my fieldwork would subscribe to this dehumanizing discourse wholesale, although the tendency to reify nations, and Turkic ones as quintessentially evil, is widespread and it is not rare to encounter views such as Nersik Ispiryan’s in the diaspora. Indeed, the tragic mode of ethnopop mythico-history seems most vehemently endorsed by singers currently living outside Armenia, whose productions are nevertheless widely circulated in the entirety of the multilocal nation’s mediascape, including any record store in Yerevan. And a degree of fatalism, both on a personal and on a collective level – the idea that history is bound to repeat itself in its most tragic fashion for the Armenians – is widely acknowledged (and condemned) as a ‘national trait’ by Armenians I’ve met both in the republic and in the diaspora.
The song *Gini Lits* (‘Pour the wine’) is a well-known revolutionary song, which commemorates and glorifies the assassination of Talaat Pasha, the minister of Interior and, after 1917, Grand Vizier of the Young Turk Triumvirate that coordinated the genocide on the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This assassination was carried out in 1921 by a young Armenian in Berlin as a part of Operation Nemesis, a Dashnak project of retribution seeking to murder the key perpetrators of the Armenian genocide (all of whom had been sentenced to death *in absentia* in the Turkish Courts-Martial of 1919-1920 following World War I). The song has been recorded in a variety of versions and is known by heart by many Armenians both in the republic and the diaspora. The version by Sahak Sahakyan described here is closer to the folk/traditional end of the ethnopop spectrum than the songs mentioned thus far, as it is an acoustic performance on folk instruments with only the presence of electronic drums and keyboard strings to ‘dilute’ its folk character, but the fact that it has a music video already moves it beyond the ‘pure’ folk sphere into the realm of contemporary media spectacles that is the offspring of Anglo-American pop culture.

Unlike the agonizing and fatalistic nature of the previously characterized tragic mode of Armenian televisual mythico-history, the enactment of violence here is a means of achieving a certain degree of closure in dealing with the traumatic genocidal past. Indeed, the song’s narrative is produced as an unfolding series celebrating the courage and heroism of Armenian *fedayi* freedom fighters, ultimately revitalizing the wretched nation through a murder. Starting with yet another dramatic introduction, the setting turns out to be a Dashnak meeting in the newly established, pre-Soviet republic in the late 1910s:

The camera’s eye reveals a table covered with a red drapery on which the following objects are shown: black and white photo portraits of the Ittihadist Triumvirate, a flag of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation with a revolver lying on top, a burning candle in a candlestick, a dip pen and several other small utensils evoking the atmosphere of the 1910s. Around six men, apparently ranging from their twenties to fifties in age, are gathered in formal dress – all of them with moustaches, some of them wearing a black hat or smoking a pipe. A hunting rifle and a bronze samovar on a table covered with an oriental carpet are seen in the background. A revolver is touched while wrapped in the red flag, and while the revolver is offered from the flag to Soghomon Tehlirian, the youngest in the crowd, the men are shown solemnly uttering words that are seen but not heard, as in taking an oath. A conversation is heard meanwhile:

- *The criminals must be punished.*
- *You are right, Natali. Then there will be justice.*
- *The Dashnaks must sentence the perpetrators. We must act immediately, friends.*
– What do you think, Armen Garo?

– There can be only one decision. We must let them pay back... and that's final!
– It's clear.
– That's it, no question; it's final!

Soghomon Tehlirian is chosen to assassinate the former Grand Vizier, who had fled to Germany, the Ottoman Empire’s ally in World War I. The song, until now consisting merely of a low string sound providing cinematic tension, is slowly building up with flute and duduk in unisono, and the vocal part finally starts:

_The Armenians' horror shook the world,
The Turkish throne fell to the ground,
Let me tell you about the death of Talaat._

_Pour the wine, dear friend, pour the wine,
Drink it nicely; drink it with delight._

They key moments for the remainder of the video revolve around three scenes, all of them incorporating a symbolism of wine and blood transformations. Thus I am tempted to call it a cinematographic ‘transubstantiation’ of the nation. First, after being selected to effectuate the assassination, Soghomon Tehlirian pours a bowl of wine on the photos of the Turkish Triumvirate that planned and perpetrated the Armenian genocide. Together with the solemnly uttered (but not heard) words uttered with a hand on the revolver wrapped on a red Dashnak flag, the wine seems to consecrate the retributive endeavor and imprint an iconic representation of the Pashas to be killed with a symbolic representation of the blood that will flow from their bodies, itself a retribution for the blood of all the genocide victims.

After arriving in Berlin, the city being pictured by German street name plates and horse carts, a handsome Soghomon is shown looking Talaat straight into his face, calling his name, and shooting a bullet through his forehead. Thus, the wine from the first image has become blood by a cinematographic logic of sympathetic magic. Then we are shown a trial in a German court, in which various people (one of them a member of the Armenian clergy) are holding pleas before the court, and the ultimate verdict is that Soghomon will be acquitted. The death of Talaat clearly becomes a symbol of national resurrection in the third and final picture, in which we see celebrations of both the assassination and the acquittal. Again wine is poured, which has come to symbolize the life force of the living again, through this bardic montage. Bread is broken as revolvers are pointed in the air, blanks are shot and toasts are made.
This media text can be read as an element of a much wider tradition of Armenian national folklore in which the violent acts of armed, ‘fearless’ individuals, who can be described either as terrorists or freedom fighters depending on one’s vantage point, are glorified. During the peak of Armenian terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s, when groups like the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide assassinated at least 33 Turkish diplomats, killed around 30 civilians, and bombed various airports and shopping malls, famous Soviet Armenian writers such as Silva Kaputikian and Hovhannes Shiraz published poems eulogizing the fallen activists (Panossian 2007: 310-311). The popular Syrian-born Dashnak singer Karnig Sarkissian has also gained both fame and notoriety for having been jailed in the eighties, accused of conspiring to bomb a Turkish diplomat in Philadelphia.10

In his Resistance and Revenge, French historian Jacques Derogy describes the events pictured in the music video for Pour the Wine from a realist perspective, using testimonials from eyewitnesses to construct his narrative (1990). Although these accounts describe a Soghomon Tehlirian who, somewhat less heroically, covered his head and did not dare to confront the mass murderer face to face, shooting the victim from behind instead, the televisual depiction of this historical episode is nevertheless quite close to the account of what actually seems to have happened. Indeed, it reached newspapers worldwide in 1921 that Talaat Pasha had been killed by someone whose family had been massacred on the orders of this man, and that he was acquitted for this reason (ibid. xix-xxviii). The mythico-historical aspect is thus rather found in the ritual condensation (Leach 1976) of these events, projecting them into ‘the world out there’ by selectively ‘troping’ events from history into a mass mediated construct of symbolic significance with two major implications for a political worldview. First of all, the Armenian people is shown as heroic and powerful, fighting injustice through courageous acts even during a period when the nation has been decimated in much of its traditionally inhabited lands through genocidal violence. Secondly, the suffering of the Armenians is shown to be internationally recognized in the court trial in Germany, in much contrast to the meager willingness to speak out openly against the atrocities of the genocide to the Turkish government by the international community in our times. Thus, the heroic mode can be seen as an optimistic inversion of the tragic mode of televisual mythico-history, substituting its sense of an eternal return of the same with an empowering sense of hope, while largely retaining its Manichean dichotomies in the reification of nationhood. Instead of putting the focus on fatalistic suffering in the symbolic construction of an immoral categorical Other, the focus in heroic mythico-historical narrations is on the morality and redemptive potential of the we-group.

10 As reported in the Boston Herald, 24-10-1982.
FIGURE 1. Stills from ‘Pour the wine’. A. Soghomon Tehlirian pours wine on photos of Enver, Djemal and Talaat Pasha. B. Talaat Pasha is shot on broad daylight in Hardenbergstrasse, Berlin. C. Wine is shared in a celebration of the retribution.
2.2. THE ETHNOPHONIC REED

As the prominence of music videos in the last few decades’ global pop culture already attests to, popular music is hardly ever ‘mere sound’ in today’s media-saturated condition. Some songs of the Anglo-American pop canon that have become popular worldwide seem to have acquired their memorable character from their music videos, or from being featured in popular commercials, and these moving images continue to exert their emblematic aura upon listeners even when such songs are listened to as a mere recording. Similarly, in the age of digital music and MP3 downloading, many music aficionados will complain that something essential about their enjoyment of music has gotten lost with the disappearance of the previously inexorable tie between a music recording and the artwork of its material carrier – a final stage in the downsizing of record artwork that was already initiated in the transition from 12” vinyl LPs to CDs. But even without all these visual carriers of sound, there is still often an intersensory amplification binding music to other domains of sensory experience (Connor 2005). In his study of portable music players, or ‘personal stereos’, Michael Bull (2000) has shown how playing music while on-the-move can become a powerful tool to aestheticize urban experience, providing a soundtrack that is dialogically engaged with the extra-musical realms of everyday life.

Far from the commonplace idea of listening as an aural engagement with the merely audible, we will thus need to move from the idea of music perception as a passive consumption of physical sound waves to one that takes the whole range of associations, intersensory amplifications, instantaneous visceral reactions (e.g. by sheer volume) and the creative labor of the imagination into account, none of which are primarily under the conscious control of a willing subject. In fact, the reduction of music to the unisensorial realm of pure sound only becomes a ‘sensible’ idea to our common sense once music is detached from music performances through recording technology (Attali 1982), and seems to withdraw into its private realm of immateriality, a detached sonic hyperspace of floating auditory signifiers for which the ghostly realm of faceless voices that is radio still forms a vivid illustration. Before the industrialization of music through recording technology, there had to be a coevalness of performer, performance and audience, if there was to be music, and thus audiences and performances were at least forced to see, if not smell one another’s presence.

And yet, even in the fleeting, transcendent realm of radio, music has not become mere sound; the difference however is that the ‘substantive’, contextual content the listener encounters is no longer tied to a specific event, but rather emerges out of the intersection of mechanical reproduction and fluctuating social contexts. One stumbles upon a song, and suddenly finds oneself in a process tapping into an ensemble of memories and associations which may be both of a personal nature and of a collectively shared one. A song may have become associated with a past romantic affair, the loss of a loved one, and one could call the aura of such ensembles of musical memory involving a more or less
personal history mnemophonie in nature. Enlarging our circle of identification, the refrain of a number one hit song of a particular summer may enliven memories of the Zeitgeist of a decade for an entire generation. Such instances of aural mnemotechnics with regards to a particular social timeframe could be called chronophonic, i.e. a communal, qualitative ‘chronicling’ through sound, if one does not mind such extravagant linguistic græcophilia.

For the latter to occur, mediation and distribution are necessities, for it is radio and television airplay and the circulation of sound carriers and pop culture images that provide the anchors in the field of the social that can be attached to personal memories to incorporate them into collective, mass mediated ensembles. In this light, the role of record artwork and the impact of music videos in the making of a pop song’s aura may be seen as a nostalgic, emancipatory fetishization of the ‘senseless’ audio recording, seeking to ground music back into the full sensory apparatus as it was before the age of mechanical reproduction, in which a non-local aesthetic dimension comes to serve its role as a mnemonic social glue.

Similar processes of fetishization lie at the origins of what I propose to call the ethnophonic aura of musical elements. In the aural imaginary of the West, the sound of bagpipes may instantly trigger mental pictures of Scottish highlands, kilts and tartans (Qureshi 1997), whereas hearing the sound of a sitar tends to figure as a sonic index of the Indian subcontinent. Depending on the predisposition of the listener, such associations may differ widely, the resonant timbre of a sitar merely giving rise to a dim and diffuse orientalism, or perhaps appear filtered through a romantic sixties gaze with a smell of sandalwood or patchouli incense, with the appearance of krishnaites and George Harrison included. Whatever the specific manifestations of this process, the linking of certain musical instruments to a designated locus points, once again, to the cultural imaginary masquerading as ‘mere sound’. Thus, specific instruments serve to represent nations in an international musical order, forming an organological cartography for the romantic essentialist project, the popular mysticism of a Herderian Volksgeist, that reproduces and naturalizes the idea of ‘the world order’ as a world-of-nations (see Billig 1995), each nation ‘a people’ with its own distinct national culture. The ethnophonic aura is not embedded in the physical instrument, but rather emerges as a fetishistic quality that seems to ‘animate’ the instrument when its musical repertoires, playing styles and visual representations are cultivated in national or ethnic terms.

Instruments are not merely ‘nationalized’ for international relations, as the aural equivalent of a world exposition pavilion or for the equally expo-ist spectacles of ‘world music’. They may also be invested with much significance within a nation’s emic soundscape, fetishized to resound its history and cosmology. As Qureshi writes:

A social and art-historical discourse of meaning invests instruments as objects with explicit historicity, so that they become material repositories of past meanings, and their visual
representations serve to define sonority through historically situated social practices and aesthetic codes. (1997: 4)

In an article on the emergence of the Soviet folk ensemble in Armenia, the ethnomusicologist Andy Nercessian (2000) has pointed to the increasingly important role of such visual metaphors in the construction of a distinctly ‘national’ musical antiquity for Armenia since independence. “CD covers present Mediaeval churches, ancient sculptures, photographs of ancient engravings and 'old' art,” implying to its consumers, largely in the diaspora, that “they are buying the older purer culture of their homeland, not some Soviet construct” (2000: 89-90). In the same article, Nercessian shows that many musical elements that are presented as part of this ‘ancient’ tradition in contemporary Armenia in fact arose under the ideological specter of Sovietization programs in the 1920s:

The most popular folk instruments were chosen and reconstructed using Western instrument construction techniques .... the duduk, a highly popular instrument among shepherds and peasants of the time ... was reconstructed by a certain V.G. Buni, and soon became standardised in three different registers, the lowest of these – the Bunifon. The Bunifon was a digression from the 'idea' of the duduk known until then, since as we know from older recordings, the duduk's sound resembled that of a zurna, a high pitched and loud shawm, and was played at a higher register than the duduk we know today. Buni helped reintroduce it as a more ‘serious’ instrument, which was capable of deeper emotion and a finer, more sophisticated sound. (ibid. 83-84)

Here, we see how the ideological program of “raising folk music to the level of classical music” (ibid. 83) as a Soviet substitute for the perceived decadence of ‘bourgeois’ music has given rise to a wholly novel instrumental tradition that has become the key marker of musical Armenianness during the last decades. Indeed, the truly unique and rich character of the Armenian duduk musical tradition is what got me interested in Armenia in the first place. It was my standard answer during fieldwork for the question why I had chosen Armenia out of all possible places, and it was nearly always immediately understood. Merely mentioning the names of my favorite duduk players sometimes provided the easiest way of connecting to people curious about my foreign appearance, for it provided the instant recognition of a mutual experience of being aesthetically moved.

The duduk, a double reed aerophone made of apricot wood characterized by a distinctive velvety tone and a slightly nasal timbre, with a repertoire nowadays consisting mainly of deeply melancholic tunes, indeed seems capable of authenticating any musical performance as Armenian. But this ethnophonic character of the duduk, as a fetishized sonorous bestower and authenticator of Armenianness, in my view largely depends on its being routinely organized through a ‘restricted code’ in the visual and discursive habits that frame it within Armenian society. Thus, there actually is a limit
to what musical ‘wholes’ can be rendered authentically Armenian by incorporating the duduk. Here, I will re-invoke my metaphor of the bardic montage, as a griotic point of mediation in which a plethora of voices is assembled in the negotiation of contested history through the juxtaposition of images, to illustrate how the ethnophonic significance of the duduk is far from self-evident. It is invoked in the most literal sense here, for the media text under scrutiny is a photomontage that serves as the artwork for a generic ‘traditional’ folk cassette tape, bought with the recommendation of a Yerevan street vendor, Yeraz im yerkir: Dasakan goharner (‘Land of my dreams. Classical treasures’), by Duduk Ensemble ‘Armenia’.

At first view, this photomontage seems to evade the very necessity of its technique, for its realist aesthetic might have been equally well captured in a single photo. Upon closer inspection of the geography pictured, and with an awareness of the political situation of the region, the necessity for its pictorial layering becomes clearer. Indeed, a whole national cosmology is revealed upon realizing what is pictured in these two layers: four Armenian duduk players wearing folkloric costumes are pasted on top of a photo of the island Akhtamar in Lake Van, about 200 kilometers west of the current closed border with Turkey. Thus the graphic designer who produced this montage has managed to materialize
an imaginary crossing of the borders, a virtual repatriation to the lands lost as a result of the genocide, that comes to visually mediate the relation between these musicians and their audiences. The monastery pictured is the Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Cross, considered a masterpiece of medieval church architecture, and notorious for having been victim to much vandalism until it was recently turned into a museum by the Turkish state. The island itself was also renamed by the Turks. Popular etymology ascribes a myth to the name Akhtamar: a lonely young man, deserted on the island longs for a reunion with his lover Tamar and thus proclaims: “Akh (Oh!), Tamar!”. However, Akhtamar has now been renamed Akdamar, meaning “white vein” in Turkish. Thus, the three modes of mythico-historic representation we distilled from ethnopop music videos come together in this compact image: a nostalgic longing for lost territories, the loss of which itself is tragic and continues to be so through effacing policies of the Turkish state, and a heroic display visually implying that the sound of Armenian music heard on this tape still belongs to these lands.

In a discussion applying the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein to an all-encompassing economy of social production, Deleuze & Guattari claim: “We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers.” According to them, an abstract monetary calculus of market forces under capitalism continually manages to disrupt and fragment all the social codes that once formed self-evident units on all scales of sociocultural organization. “We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity.” (1983: 42). And yet, the clinging to such myths of self-evident unities and totalities seems the hallmark of all ethnic nationalisms, with a romantic belief in sharing a perennial authentic folk culture that naturally 'belongs' to a bounded collectivity. The duduk ensemble cassette tape is surely such a bricolage of partial objects masquerading as a natural unity, in the sense that the polyphonic, well-tempered and harmonic music contained in it cannot have possibly resounded in the site pictured on its cover, for the very concept of an Armenian polyphonic duduk ensemble playing separate melodic 'parts', as in a western orchestra, is the result of musical Sovietization programs (Nercessian 2000). But as we have seen in analyzing the cassette artwork, the dispersion, fragmentation and transformation of the elements forming the folk music code is not primarily the result of a generalized condition of contemporary life arising from capitalism, rather it is rooted in the historical transformations of the Armenian nation, itself equally diverse and shifting shapes, through Sovietization and the genocide. And the reassembling of disparate elements proves to be successful: it is widely perceived as ‘our traditional musical culture’, the duduk that can be heard now believed to have been part of Armenian culture for thousands of years.

What, after all, could be more Armenian than a duduk? Even the natural sciences seem to

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acknowledge its essential Armenian quality: the *duduk* is made from apricot wood, and botanists around the world classify the apricot tree under its Latin denominator *Prunus armeniaca* (L), i.e. ‘Armenian plum’. And indeed, the ‘orange’ that is a part of the nation’s tricolor is popularly not called ‘orange-color’ (*narnjaguyn*), but ‘apricot-color’ (*tzirana guyn*). Apricots grow in (thus ‘come from’) Armenia, the *duduk* is made from apricot trees, the apricot is a national symbol, thus the instrument is provided with a sonorous autochthony in a quite profound sense: its material not being the product of artifice of say, metallurgy, but coming from the ground ‘naturally’. It thus seems an equally significant cultivation of the codes of authenticity that the first song on the cassette tape is called ‘Apricot Tree’ (*Tzirani Tzar*), a folk song transcribed by Komitas. “By code switching between symbols [i.e. arbitrary associations] and signs [i.e. natural indices] we are able to persuade one another that metaphoric non-sense is really metonymic sense” (Leach 1976: 22). In all of this, the voices of nature and nation get mingled into an apparent univocality, the self-evidence of which can be transported from the folk realm into the ethnopop domain by incorporating some of the extra-musical elements that provide the *duduk* with meaning.

One such instance can be found in Armenia’s entry for the 2010 Eurovision song festival, *Apricot Stone* by Eva Rivas. This song sparked a certain deal of controversy during my stay in Yerevan. To begin with, the singer has been living in Russia for her entire life and gave her interviews only in Russian and English, which led to the national candidate’s words being dubbed on Armenian national television. It was also the first time an Armenian Eurovision entry was sung entirely in English. But the Armenianness of the song was little questioned, since it featured a *duduk* melody performed by the renowned dudukist Djivan Gasparyan. A second controversy concerned the lyrics of the song, which were said to contain oblique references to the genocide. The lyrics tell a seemingly innocent story of a mother giving her daughter apricots “from the motherland,” instructing her to plant their seeds, so that she may never forget her roots when she grows up and discovers how “cruel and wild” the world is. Several news channels reported on a statement by a Turkish composer Yagoub Mutlu who apparently attended the national selection concert, claiming that the “cruel and wild” world described in the lyrics refers to the deportations of 1915, whereas the longing for the “motherland” would denote Turkish territories.

When I asked people in Yerevan on their thoughts, the matter was generally considered too trivial for such deep readings. Some didn’t understand the English lyrics to begin with, and only got a vague sense that the song was about apricots. Others agreed with the PR spokesman of the song’s author, who stated that “[t]he song has nothing to do with the Armenian genocide, and it does not have a political context. The song simply presents the Armenian culture, the Armenian traditions, the apricot, which is just an Armenian fruit and it is the symbol of Armenia, and the thoughts of a young

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The presence of Djivan Gasparyan, Armenia’s most famous duduk player and well in his eighties, on the Eurovision stage can itself be seen as a ritual condensation (Leach 1976) giving a sonorous form to Armenian national cosmology. His age made him the oldest performer to ever play on Eurovision, representing a nation that envisions itself as the oldest Christian country and sometimes even earliest civilization to follow antediluvian times. Gasparyan is a celebrated icon who almost single-handedly introduced the duduk as the quintessential sound of Armenia in the world music imaginary, and is a vocal proponent of the idea that musical instruments are naturally endowed with a nationality:

[T]he duduk is ours, a few hundred years ago, there was no Georgian duduk player. Where Armenians went, those countries began playing … a foreigner can learn the duduk and play it extremely well and people will like it, but he can never get to the essence of it, because he is not Armenian. He has not grown up in these surroundings. It is not in his blood. (in Nercessian 2001: 48)

While the coupling of geographical location (growing up in Armenian surroundings, i.e. ‘nurture’) and Armenian blood (nationalized ‘nature’) may seem contradictory requirements for understanding the true essence of the duduk, the connection between the two become more clear through the notion of suffering. To be a good duduk player, it is often claimed, one must know sadness, and one must have suffered. Thus, it is sharing a tragic history that here underlies the “obstinate otherness” (van de Port 1999) that is musically cultivated, and fits the interpretation of the Turkish composer of Armenia’s Eurovision entry.

2.3. BANAL IRREDENTISM AND NATIONAL MARTYRDOM IN THE STREETS

Now that we have looked into the articulation of national symbolism in media texts and scrutinized the mechanisms and narratives in which the perception of ‘nationalized’ sound itself is embedded, it is time to shift our attention from media space to public space. Whereas television provides its articulations of nationness mostly in domestic space, subjects are also confronted with media texts in everyday contexts, as a fragment of a song may be heard in minibuses, as a ringtone in the streets, or in advertisements in which we find both ethnopop stars and the elements of national cosmology which forms the substance of their discourse. Indeed, if we read “culture as text,” as all good Geertzian anthropologists attempt, we may speak of a certain intertextuality between media texts and the symbolic texts of public space, with elements from each domain acquiring their meaning through an inter-referencing between the two.

The public space of an urban site such as Yerevan is an inherently plural semiotic space:

13 ibid.
officialdom, commerce and grassroots initiatives all leave their traces and trails within the margins of an architecture largely inherited from Soviet central planning. Thus, to ‘read’ everyday public statements on the material edifices of Yerevan is to engage with a plurality of voices, present and historical, many of which are so quotidian as to defy any questions concerning authorship among passers-by. Indeed, in Yerevan it is the arena par excellence of “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995), of unconscious “flagging” of the nation in everyday life. After the fall of the Soviet Union, street names have everywhere been renamed after heroes from Armenia’s ‘golden age’, the 5th century, reflecting a tension with the cosmopolitan preoccupations of the emerging segment of ‘free’ commerce:

[S]treets that had communist names gained new names mainly reflecting the heroes and realities of the 5th century, the Golden Age of Armenian culture. … this was a renaming “from above.” It was structurally opposed by a renaming “from below.” … [unlike the former, the latter was directed] outwardly, toward the future and the world beyond (e.g. “Europolis,” “Eurostyle,” “Manhattan,” “Monaco”) reflecting the global trends of the time. (Abrahamian 2005: 48-49)

The most prominent marker of national cosmology that can be seen on any non-cloudy day in Yerevan can, however, barely be considered a social construction designed by nationalist elites: mount Ararat. “Omnipresent, the vision of Ararat rising above Yerevan and its outskirts constantly reminds Armenians of their putative ethnogenesis … and of their exile from Eastern Anatolia after the Armenian genocide of 1915” (Platz 1996: 34). This putative ethnogenesis consists of the biblical tradition according to which Noah’s Ark landed on Mount Ararat, and Armenian mythology, according to which Hayk, the ancestor of all Armenians, descended from Noah. The picture of Ararat is so ubiquitous in everyday material culture, much as it is in nostalgic ethnopop music videos, that it would prove quite a feat to spend a day in Yerevan without seeing its pictorial representations framed within a nationalizing discourse. It is thus, through the juxtaposition of nationalized representations with the physical mountain itself, easily turned into a “natural symbol” (Douglas 1982), much like the apricot wood of the duduk. As one informant from Yerevan told me about the nostalgic longing for Armenia she experiences while studying abroad:

It’s like, because I was born in a city where you can see this image from e-ve-ry single spot, you know. And I don’t know, it's just in me. OK, apricots, pomegranates, these are Armenian symbols, but Ararat means something else to me, I cannot explain. And very often, especially in the beginning I missed Armenia so badly that sometimes I would look at the sky and think, “oh my God, this has the shape of Ararat!”

In this instance, we can add to Billig’s term of banal nationalism the concept of banal *irredentism*, in which the idea that territories that lie outside a nation-state’s borders do form an integral part of that
nation’s spiritual essence is routinely “flagged”. During my stay in Yerevan, the central political concern of the day was the imminent opening of the border with Turkey, which would have much economic benefit for Armenia and yet for hardline nationalists would mean an unacceptable recognition of borders that were drawn after Turkey’s neglect of the Treaty of Sèvres in the aftermath of World War I in the Caucasus. More generally, there is the opinion in both the diaspora and the republic that Turkey has to recognize the genocide before there can be any discussion of open borders. Many political factions and grassroots initiatives put posters and banners in public space in order to make their statements. On one poster, the map of Armenia was shown colored red with the white crescent moon and star of Turkey’s flag in its center, to signify what would, supposedly, happen within a matter of days after the border opening. In the neighborhood of Shengavit, I noted a large banner with the statement: “The Turk remains a Turk!” The protest was even more vocal in the diaspora, notably in California where over 10,000 diaspora Armenians went to the streets and demanded recognition before any diplomatic reconciliation could take place, but in Armenia too there were protests in which Dashnak songs such as the one commemorating the assassination of Talaat Pasha were sung.

The master trope by means of which most of these politically informed expressions of unease are framed is again that of Armenia as an ‘endangered nation’, perpetually under threat of a categorical Other. But at the same time, nostalgic and heroic associations are also conjured into public space. The most frequently encountered poster on the walls of public space during my stay, which I have witnessed in dozens of places throughout the city for the entirety of the three months I was in Yerevan (even though they had already been first spread two months before my arrival), is worth analyzing to some extent because it combines these modes of representation into a whole, providing a picture of the nation as itself a cut-and-paste montage governed by a restricted code.

In this poster, which in my picture of it has already acquired a second layer of job recruitment texts (thus proving its message is not as sanctified for everyone as its authors imply), a whole mosaic of national martyrdom is condensed. In its juxtaposition of images, it provides a picture of the nation as “culture-bearing unit” (Barth 1969: 11) with its singular achievements and heritage, but these achievements are perennially threatened by troublesome boundary politics in relation with its Turkic neighbor countries. Within its range of photos and pictures of well-known military heroes, patriarchs and artists (such as the composer Aram Khachaturian and the poet Yeghishe Charents), there is an overbearing presence of cultural icons whose life has been traumatically shaped by violent encounters with Turkey and whose biographies are known by nearly all Armenians. The assassinated journalist and genocide activist Hrant Dink is pictured, as is the composer and ethnomusicologist Komitas, who never spoke again after having been arrested and deported along with 180 other members of the

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14 Under the conditions of this treaty, cities such as Trabzon, Erzurum and Van would have become part of a newly independent Armenian state, nowadays sometimes referred to as ‘Wilsonian Armenia’. Its borders were drafted under president Woodrow Wilson, who had pleaded for Armenia to become a United States protectorate. This proposal was ultimately rejected in Congress.
Armenian intellectual elite in Istanbul at the onset of the 1915 genocide, being one of the very few who survived. The famous self-portrait of Arshile Gorky and his mother is shown, as is a picture of this renowned artist of abstract expressionism, who fled the Ottoman Empire during the genocide as a young boy but whose mother died of starvation upon reaching the Russian Empire. In the center of the poster is a painting of mount Ararat by Martiros Saryan, reminding the viewer once more that the symbolic center of Armenian national cosmology is not situated within Armenian borders but in Turkey as a result of the terror of history. Also pictured is the monument dedicated to the battle of Sardarabad of 1918, in which Armenian forces halted the advancement of the Ottoman Empire into the Caucasus territories that form the current Armenian republic.

**FIGURE 3.** Dashnak poster ‘Be proud that you’re an Armenian’

*Be proud that you’re an Armenian*
*Armenia above everything else!*
*The state is us all!*
*A just country, a free citizen!*
*Not a single compromise to the Turks!*
*Turkey is in debt to us!*
*Nagorno-Karabakh is Armenia, and that’s final!*

The text serves to amplify these images with the imperatives to take pride in being Armenian “above everything else,” not giving in to anything Turkish, and making the irredentist claim that Nagorno-
Karabakh “is Armenia, and that’s final!” – no question about the tens of thousands of Azerbaijani residents of the region who were expelled from the disputed territory during the war. The stories and biographies which are synthesized into an overarching picture of Turkey endangering Armenia in this poster are transmitted as separate narrative threads in many ways: through word of mouth, history classes, documentaries, dramatized films, and as we’ve seen in the case of Hrant Dink, ethnopop music videos. Through habitual depictions in popular culture and in public space, their lives continue to be discussed, and these narratives may be assembled into a selectively ‘troped’ whole for propagandist purposes as in the anti-Turkish mosaic of the Dashnak poster.

While pointing out such overt nationalist manifestations to my cosmopolitan friends, they would often argue that they don’t even notice them anymore and disagree with the essentialist picture of Turkey provided. But at the same time, the implicit knowledge of these biographies is explicated in such discussions, and the importance of these national icons and their achievements widely acknowledged. Such was also the case when I discussed a music video depicting the tragic life of the composer Komitas by ethnopop singer Andre with Drastamat, the manager of a well-known traditional folk ensemble. “This Andre, one time he is Christ, another time he is Sayat-Nova [a famous 18\textsuperscript{th} century Armenian troubadour], the next time … I don’t know what. But when last summer he was supposed to play at an open air concert in Yerevan he refused to perform in the end when it became clear last minute that it wouldn’t be broadcast on TV”. Thus, appropriations of national icons for assumed political and commercial motives may become an occasion to acknowledge the importance of the real Armenian being depicted in these ‘flawed’, mediated forms on the streets or on television, thus figuring all the more in the nation’s collective memory while purified of aspects considered immoral.

Another linkage that caught my attention through my ‘bifocal’ approach to media space and public space is the jubilant lauding of military icons in both realms. Indeed, much as the patriotic songs celebrating the lives of \textit{fedayi} freedom fighters appear mythologized in media space and are routinely sung in the army today, I continually stumbled upon articulations of both officialdom and commerce celebrating the military apparatus in the streets of Yerevan. Upon ascending the escalators of any Yerevan metro platform, the stops of which themselves are named after military heroes such as General Andranik, Marshall Baghramyan and Garegin Nzhdeh, I kept being struck by a vodka advertisement celebrating a brave masculinity of military valor, in which a man in camouflage uniform wearing a cap and boots is sitting by a mountain lake with a sizable rifle pointed towards the sky – “A taste formed by nature”. My attention was also caught by a series of billboards of pop culture icons advertising the Armenian army, picturing rabiz singer Tata Simonyan with the slogan “My weapon is my song,” and another omnipresent series picturing people from all ranks of society for the occasion of the Armenian National Army’s 18\textsuperscript{th} birthday with the text “Our name is the Armenian army”. The most blatant sanctification of military values could be found on a state billboard featuring the most legendary of all mustached \textit{fedayi} warriors, “General Andranik 145 [years since he was born, R.A.] –
Your holy name must be remembered from century to century!” This Armenian ‘holy’ commander has become infamous in neighboring Azerbaijan for having introduced the custom of cutting off and collecting the ears of one’s enemies as war trophies, as in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war this custom was reinstituted and referred to as ‘doing an Andranik on someone’ (de Waal 2003: 168), and yet he is the most central and lauded of military figures in the Armenian patriotic pantheon.

In all these billboards and posters, as in the appropriation of mount Ararat, we see how mythico-history is used in public space for motives both propagandist and commercial, their well-known narratives often cross-referenced through media space and public space, invoking both elite culture and popular culture icons to produce a distinctly national cosmology. While not applauded by all beholders, critics in their moral distanciations of commercial or propagandist motives often use these criticisms to glorify the ‘true’ nation and its mythico-historic icons even more. In the process, national history is rendered ubiquitous, becomes a subject of everyday encounters and is presented as if, in William Faulkner’s words, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

### 2.4. Theoretical Interlude: Mediation, Sensational Forms and the Terror of History

In the conclusion to his 1949 text *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, the Romanian historian and scholar of comparative religion Mircea Eliade reflects on the social implications of embracing a historicism that provides no transcendent rationale capable of embedding the excessive cruelty of recent history in a framework of meaning. Although his idea that ‘archaic man’ lived outside history, in a cyclical microcosm of eternal repetition, would raise a few well-deserved eyebrows among later anthropologists (see e.g. Wolf 1982), his intuition that history as history, detached from any transcendent significations, poses a problem for those who have had to endure its violent force for no apparent ‘higher’ cause, is right on the mark. He sees the nostalgia for mythical repetition and the abolition of linear time in modernist literature, as well as the millennial tendencies in Marxism, as contemporary attempts to escape from history (152, 153), and speculates that the continuing terror of history must necessarily be accompanied with a mythic productivity reminiscent of that of ‘religious man’ if it is to provide modern subjects with effective ways of coping with the enduring problem of evil.

Here, I am not claiming nationalism is a religion, but rather want to intervene in the narrative on audiovisually mediated nationalism to open up the categories, experiment and hypothesize out of the box, drawing parallels in order to get a glimpse of the non-categorical reality beyond the mammoth concepts we adopt in our habitual representations. The dichotomy between religion and nationalism seems to me more a cleavage stemming from discursive habits, in which we sometimes unquestioningly adopt emic concepts, than an inherent discontinuity in reality itself. The argument can be made on a variety of levels. In its traditional form, one could make the argument that the two oftentimes share
social mechanisms for inducing Durkheimian states of collective effervescence for the sake of imprinting an image of society on a visceral, experiential level. In content too, a close conceptual kinship between religion and nationalism may be discovered. For Anthony Smith, the doctrine of *ethnic election* (i.e. constituting a chosen people), the sanctification of a particular territory, the ethno-mythological “communal narrative traditions” concerning a primordial utopia or golden age of an imaginary past, and the concept of *national sacrifice*, with its “glorious dead, whose ‘name lives for evermore, and whom age cannot wither’” (2002: 808, emphasis in original), all echo the notion of the sacred in contemporary nationalism. And indeed, all four of these ‘sacred properties’ are applicable to the Armenian case. The idea of Armenians as a ‘chosen people’ at the dawn of time has been articulated in both religious terms and in that of secular mythico-science; the influential 18th century theologian Mikayel Chamchian, working at the St. Lazarus monastery of Venice, has claimed with much eloquence that the Garden of Eden was located in Armenia and thus Armenian was spoken by God, whereas currently the secular version of Armenians as the original Indo-Europeans is more popular, deriving from a hypothesis of Thomas V. Gamkrelidze and V. V. Ivanov, who claim that the Indo-European *Urheimat* was located south of the Caucasus (Abrahamian 2005). In everyday banal irredentism we can see that mount Ararat, indeed, features as a sanctified territory for the Armenians, following in the footsteps of the Ark of Noah, its image providing an imaginary link to a golden past.

The notion of *national sacrifice* with its idolization of national heroes as martyrs is sometimes articulated in perplexingly literal terms in Armenian popular culture, as we’ve already seen in the tragic and heroic music videos about Hrant Dink and the assassination of Talaat Pasha, and in the billboard urging passers-by to commemorate the ‘holy name’ of General Andranik for all centuries. This sanctification of General Andranik can be traced even further in the lyrics for the upbeat ethnopop song *Andranik Pasha* by Harout Pamboukjian, a popular singer who is much sought after for weddings in Armenian communities worldwide and has been dubbed ‘the Armenian Elvis’ for his looks and erratic dance moves. The song opens with funk drum rhythms, 70s style organs, wah-wah guitar melodies in minor, until the lyrics about the guerrilla commander start, showcasing a peculiar hybrid ‘national religiosity’ with a distinctive Christian yet at the same time almost sacrilegious theme, much like the audiovisual ‘national transubstantiation’ of blood and wine we saw earlier:

Don’t be indifferent to the Armenian people,
Rise from your grave, Andranik Pasha!
Turn the Armenian troops forward,
Rise from your grave, Andranik Pasha!

Let me be a sacrifice to you, Keri and Smbat¹⁵,

¹⁵ Keri and Smbat were also *fedayi* freedom fighters in the Armenian national movement, the contemporaries
So that they may defend the Armenian fate forever,
Move your redeeming arm anew,
Rise from your grave, Andranik Pasha!

What is important to note here is that the categorical idea that religion is concerned with transcendent realms of the divine and the afterlife whereas nationalism is an ideology of immanence merely involved with the mundane realm of politics and identity does not quite hold. Not only is there a sacralizing dimension to many ethnic nationalisms in discourse, it may also be argued that both phenomena have mediation at their core, while seeking to render the social processes of mediation on which they depend invisible, so as to enforce a degree of self-evidence and unquestionable naturalness. Both mobilize mediation to produce a sense of the absolute. We may follow Birgit Meyer in understanding religion as “a practice of mediation between the level of humans and God … or some transcendental realm or force” (2010: 750-751, emphasis added). In nationalism, the distance that requires mediation is often conceptualized as mainly horizontal (a distance between people in order to become compatriots), whereas the distance in religion is often seen as vertical (a distance between the human and divine in order to achieve salvation). But we need not adopt such a rigidly gridded analytical compass for our etic view of the matter, for the social navigability of subjects, who may often identify as both national and religious, is implicated in all imaginary directions. In Armenian patriotic music videos, it is a common sight to see singers turn their heads upwards and open their hands towards the sky while pronouncing ‘Armenia’ in a final dramatic cadence to a song, ritually condensing a staged devotion into a media text, the affective dimension of which can be ‘unpacked’ and felt by merely looking at it. And it is a gesture that seems very much aimed at the transcendental, often staged in front of mount Ararat as the ‘beyond’ of the mundane here and now.

The Armenian church, a national church not open to non-Armenians, in its entirety of institutional organization and rituals can be seen as nowadays devoted to the production of Armenianness, which is something distinctly different from pre-national times in which it was rather a belonging to this church (itself not a ‘national’ belonging in the modern sense) which was the primary meaning of being Armenian. During the autumn of 2009, just before I left to Yerevan, I witnessed a speech on diaspora television from the Armenian patriarchate in Antelias, Lebanon, one of the two main branches of the Armenian Apostolic Church, where the spiritual leader made a speech in which he passionately pleaded all Armenians to say “thousand times no!” (hazar angam voch) to the protocols which would open the borders with Turkey, thus sanctifying the categorical dichotomies underlying this discussion.

To belong to a nation is as much a belief as any conviction, embedded in social matrices of authorization that seek to instill a sense of taken-for-grantedness upon imaginings which themselves are of General Andranik.
the product of socio-historical processes. The role of media in the formation of such imaginings has been emphasized ever since Anderson explicated the role of vernacular print-languages in early nationalisms (1991: 37-46). In our day, too, the distribution of “sensational forms” (Meyer 2010: 751) plays an important role in the shaping of imagined communities that consist of persons who will by and large never meet face-to-face, and yet at times of crisis will be asked to sacrifice their lives for the greater good of this socio-historically constructed community. In this chapter we have dealt with a wide range of such sensational forms. The habitus of a nationalized individual is ultimately what renders a musical element ethnophonic, the effect of a ‘synaesthetic rhyme’ from visual input which, combined with mass mediated narratives about *duduk* symbolism and a cultivated stylistic musical repertoire, fetishizes the instrument as a demarcator of Armenianness. But such a habitus can only arise in a social context in which there is a routine engagement with such narratives. I suggest to widen the concept of sensational forms from Meyer, which she introduces to mean “authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental that shape both religious content (beliefs, doctrines, sets of symbols) and norms” (ibid. 751), to encompass the entirety of social processes engaged with myth-symbol complexes which are habitually muddled by projecting emic categories of nation and religion onto them. In the case of Armenian national cosmology, the authorizations do not spring from one center, e.g. a nationalizing state program, but from a variety of Armenian cultural centers all of which are highly interested in producing media texts within (and as we will see later, sometimes without) the restricted audiovisual codes of the nation and its modes of audiovisual mythico-history.

In their portability, songs on cellphones or downloaded music videos provide instant access to a time and space that oftentimes transcend that of a subject’s physical position – for a diaspora Armenian who was raised by parents who did not transmit the ‘national heritage’ of language and culture, the homeland may reveal itself through DVDs and MP3s, whereas a native of Yerevan may construct an image of his/her nation before Soviet-times and before the genocide through music videos which depict the folklore that purportedly belongs to these times. Thus audiovisual material culture provides a “portable link” (Meyer 2010: 753) to the nation, both in a geographic sense for members of the diaspora, and in a local sense in Yerevan, where I have stumbled upon boys walking around listening to ethnopop songs on their cellphone, and cassettes are regularly played in taxis and minibuses. Even if the lyrical content is not overtly patriotic, the national language is turned from a carrier of information into a medium of aesthetic expression and ‘national’ instruments exert their ethnophonic aura. In Yerevan this tends to be a largely unconscious activity, whereas in the diaspora it is embedded in a dialogic process with the aesthetic expressions of the ‘host nation’ and thus leads to a more self-conscious attitude, in which intense affective states provoked by sensational forms turn sensation into “the personal authoritative index” for feeling Armenian. Thus, parallels may exist between becoming “God’s subjects” and becoming national subjects (ibid. 574).

Having looked into the role of history as both formative agent in and thematic subject of
Armenian ethnopop forms and aesthetics, we will scrutinize the themes of a portable imaginary homeland as a means of coping with the terror of history in the next chapter – exploring the musical malleability of national space and time in the production and consumption of ethnopop music, and finding in it mechanisms of redemptive consumption, televisual mnemotechnics and performative primordialization.
3. THE MUSICAL MALLEABILITY OF SPATIOTEMPORAL BORDERS

On my first visit to Armenia in 2008, I took a short trip to the provincial town of Vanadzor, the third largest city in the country. It is situated in a lush green landscape and littered with rusty factories that have been left abandoned since the fall of communism. In the evening, after checking in to an old Soviet hotel, I set my first steps on the town’s central square. My foreign presence was immediately noticed by a group of local children, aged from 7 to 14 years old. They gathered around me and the youngest one of them, a boy with a boisterous and cheerful appearance, who had lived in France but whose family had recently repatriated to Armenia, asked me in English where I was from. Upon telling him I’m from the Netherlands it was only a matter of seconds until the boy expressed his eagerness to know whether my country had recognized the Armenian genocide (the word itself pronounced in Russian, genotsid) or not. Somewhat baffled by this sudden political turn to our conversation, I vaguely remembered the parliamentary motion that had been adopted in favor of genocide recognition, and thus could answer with an affirmative ‘yes’. The boy translated it to Armenian for his friends and it was received with much praise and exhilaration. All of them cheered, some of them approached me to give me a high five. Then they wanted to know what I thought about Armenia, and whether I knew that their country had been much bigger in the past. After some more small talk, the kids returned to playing their games on the square and, to me, became child again.

Almost two years later, during the last weekend of my fieldwork in Yerevan, I interviewed Suren Tadevosyan, one of the foremost directors of Armenian music videos. We met in a coffee bar named Jazzveh, sipping the oriental coffee that is known as Turkish coffee in some parts of the world but is named Armenian coffee here. He told me about the pioneering work he had done in making contemporary ethnographic (azgragrakan) music videos – he claimed to be the first director from the Armenian republic to shoot a folkloristic music video in the parts of ‘historic’ Armenia that have become modern Turkey. The video accompanying the song Mayr by Aghasi Ispiryan showcases a singer wearing the folkloric costume of Sasun, a duduk player sitting on the edge of Lake Van, the ruins of old Armenian churches in Ani and the twin peaks of mount Ararat seen from the Turkish side, i.e. as a mirror image of the view from Yerevan. “It was a very intense experience,” Suren told me about the mixture of fear and excitement he felt when he and his film crew crossed the border between Georgia and Turkey, “to go with a car with an Armenian number plate, playing Armenian music, and with Aghasi wearing the Armenian traditional dress … to visit all these places that had been our homeland before the genocide.” He also told that he was surprised that he got along well with the local Turks he met, and that they were generally much more friendly and welcoming than the Kurds, whom, he insisted, were mobilized by the Ottoman authorities to effectuate the genocidal policies of the early 20th century.
These two episodes illustrate how the repercussions of a traumatic past continue to live on and be routinely staged as an everyday concern for many Armenians. On the one hand, the tragic legacy of the genocide and its transformation into a ‘national trauma’ is reproduced from a very young age onwards, and the concomitant quest for political recognition has become for many, especially in the diaspora, a constituent factor in what it means to be Armenian. But during my fieldwork I noticed that, in Armenian popular culture, the quest for political recognition is not the only or even primary way in which the tragic reverberations of 1915 resound in everyday life. In music videos such as the one directed by Suren Tadevosyan, the viewer is deterritorialized into a mediated state of virtual repatriation – the times and places, architecture and folk traditions, that were annihilated through the Ottoman massacres, become suddenly accessible to the senses, exerting their affective force upon the viewers’ imagination through the television screen. Such instances of audiovisual time travel are far from uncommon in contemporary Armenian culture, and I will treat its various instances in this chapter as contemporary ways of dealing with the terror of history – attempts at gaining cognitive closure with and/or seeking retribution for a tragic and unjust past.

3.1. **Redemptive Consumption and the Dream of ‘Sea-to-Sea’ Armenia**

*Forward, forward, Armenia!*
*Let your path be green [i.e. fruitful]*
*We want you to get stronger, so that*
*You may become a ‘sea-to-sea’ country again*

– Ruzan Avetiqyan – *Hayastan* (*Armenia*)

In the music video accompanying this song, the singer, who is also a teacher of folk song at the Yerevan conservatory, is pictured in a white cabriolet, leaving from Yerevan’s airport to explore the country. The footage is interspersed with images of military marches and tanks shooting ammunition. In an interview with Armenian show business magazine *Bravo Hayer* (*Bravo Armenians*), the singer is asked to comment on the following statement:

*It is impossible to forget your fatherland. There is no more noble disease (azniv hivandutyun), than karot for the fatherland.*

The singer responds: “Let me address it this way: without the Armenian Republic, without our home, our mountains, our stones, our trees, I cannot live. One week abroad, ten days, it can be very pleasant, but after that I am already gasping for breath (shunchs ktrvum e).” Although the militant patriotic song I’ve quoted above is one of her best-known songs, neither the interviewer nor the artist seems to care for seriously addressing the notion of a ‘sea-to-sea’ Armenia, which would stretch from the Caspian
Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. It seems no more than a folkloristic kind of imaginary irredentism, harking back to the geography of the largest pre-Christian Armenian kingdom, not tied in any way to any realistic political program. No one I’ve asked about this during my 3 months in Yerevan believed that Armenia will become a ‘sea-to-sea’ country again during their lives, although some did like to cherish such hopes as were demanded in 1919 when an Armenian Delegation visited the post-World War I Peace Conference in Paris (Panossian 2006: 253).

And yet, many do continue to refer to the provinces of Eastern Anatolia on an everyday basis as ‘our historic lands’. In fact, any piece of land that has ever been a part of any Armenian kingdom for any period of time seems a candidate for this predicate in mainstream Armenian discourse. Even in western academia, the otherwise very critical Simon Payaslian (who, like many figures in Armenian studies at American universities is considered an unpatriotic ‘traitor’ by some nationalist academics in Armenia) adopts the term ‘historic Armenia’ in his History of Armenia (2007), albeit only as geographic designation. Why are these lands not considered equally historic Persia, historic Georgia, historic Turkey or even historic Kurdistan? Why is the earth’s surface supposed to be ‘naturally composed’ of meticulously marked, bounded territorial units to begin with? Admittedly, it is true that large areas of modern Turkey have been traditionally referred to by western geographers as the Armenian Highlands, and that there has been a thoroughly organized cultural politics of counter-naming by Turkish officialdom which seeks erase all Armenian (and Kurdish) traces, including even the names of animals. But in the case of ‘historic Armenia’, much more is at stake than a mere geographic denominator. An Armenianess rooted in the land is connotatively implied.

In his book Banal Nationalism, Michael Billig (1995) has pointed to the subtle mechanisms that render the idea of the world as an atomistic mosaic of bounded nations commonsensical to our contemporary psyche. We are bombarded all our lives with the contours of national maps, which are instantly recognized as an icon of the nation; flags on public buildings are not waved, but hang unnoticed. We speak about ‘the’ economy and ‘the’ weather, when we mean the national instances of these phenomena. Seen in this sense, national ‘identity’ is not some interior phenomenon or even a sense of belonging, but rather a subtle epiphenomenon implicitly actualized in our engagements with one another and our everyday surroundings, “a routine way of talking and listening … which habitually closes the front door, and seals the borders” (1995: 109). In Armenia, however, defining these borders turns out to be an ambiguous matter even in the most quotidian instances. I have witnessed debate even about what constitutes ‘the’ weather: nearly all weather reports will include the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in their forecasts, but opinions are divided on whether to picture merely the

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16 This strategy of erasing Armenian and Kurdish traces in the Anatolian animal kingdom has been rather prolific in recent years. For instance, the wild sheep formerly known as Ovis Armeniana has been renamed Ovis Orientalis Anatolicus; the roe deer formerly called Capreolus Capreolus Armenus was renamed Capreolus Cupreolus Cupreolus; the red fox formerly known as Vulpes Vulpes Kurdistanica is today known simply as Vulpes Vulpes. See BBC News, Turkey renames ‘divisive’ animals. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4328285.stm, last accessed 24-01-2011.
territory that constituted its Soviet administrative division, which leaves a cleavage of about 10 kilometers between Armenia and its exclave, or to include all the territories of de jure Azerbaijan that have been occupied by Armenian forces since the war. Similarly, as anthropologist Tsypylma Darieva has noted, on the occasion of genocide memorial day in 2005, a weather report “with an unusual geography” was broadcast on Armenian television, “extending far beyond the national borders to inform viewers of the weather … in Kars and Erzerum, located behind the closed border” – implying what a daily weather report might have looked like, had the genocide not taken place (2008: 93).

Such cartographic elasticity is far from uncommon in everyday life. In a word, in post-communist Armenia, irredentism sells. Both the terra irredenta that falls under the internationally recognized borders of Turkey and that of disputed Nagorno-Karabakh in de jure Azerbaijan form a habitual component of product marketing. One day, while shopping for groceries, I witnessed a special product island in the supermarket with an image of ‘We Are Our Mountains’, the tufa monument picturing the folkloric headress of the region that is widely regarded as the symbol of the secessionist quasi-republic, with a text: “products from the soil of our Nagorno-Karabakh” (emphasis added). A great deal of products encountered in everyday life are named after places that are currently no longer inhabited by Armenians (or in the case of Erebuni, even predate them): Ararat cognac, Kilikia and Erebuni beer, Van and Akhtamar cigarettes. Similarly, the history of Yerevan emerging as the 12th Armenian capital, largely as the result of resettling genocide survivors, can be spotted in many neighborhoods, which are named after territories in Eastern Anatolia that were lost to Turkey (i.e. Zeytun, Arabkir, Malatia). Thus one may find oneself in Yerevan in a neighborhood named after a territory currently in Turkey, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes that are named after regions in Turkey, while looking over the national/natural symbol of mount Ararat, also located just across the borders in Turkey.

When visiting an Armenian shop in Holland, the owner told me that her range of Armenian products (CDs, DVDs, books, canned fruits and vegetables) very much serves as a hearth (ojakh) to the local diasporan community. To buy a piece of music or food from the Armenian homeland here becomes a portable way to actualize a deterritorialized sense of nationhood, a consumptive redemption with the state of otarutyun (a word meaning ‘abroad-ness’ or alienation, used specifically to describe the liminal condition of living outside the fatherland). A similar process of nostalgia seems to underlie the naming of products after lost territories, as indeed I have been told that they are given such names simply because it sells well, just as some mineral waters are named after picturesque rural towns in Armenia (Dilijan, Jermuk) that produce them – given an aura of more noble times and places, producing a sense of a glorious national history or pastoral authenticity in the nooks and crannies of everyday life. Such redemptive consumer goods “challenge the utility of the dichotomy between national citizen and consuming subject” (Abu-Lughod 2005: 194).

In the audiovisual domain of Armenian ethnopop music, too, it is not uncommon to see such
habitual instances of referring to lost territories to be ‘redeemed’. Here, again, we can distinguish between a largely imaginary irredentism born of nostalgia, as we saw in the references to pre-Christian ‘sea-to-sea’ Armenia, and the much more acute politicized irredentism regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, reflecting real hopes that in the recent future, perhaps like Kosovo, this territory will be recognized by the international community as a second Armenian state, or be merged with the Armenian republic. As much as mount Ararat is the symbol of banal irredentism for the territories of Western Armenia, the monument ‘We Are Our Mountains’ is the primary symbol for an Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh, pictured in the very center of the secessionist quasi-state’s coat of arms.

In the Eurovision Song Festival in 2009, much controversy arose over this symbol both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, since it was edited into Armenia’s montage of national heritage imagery in the world expo-ist introductory clip that announced the nation’s musical contribution during the semi-finals. After complaints from the Azerbaijani broadcasting union, the irredentist symbol was removed by the Eurovision producers in the final. However, in retaliation, during the announcement of national votes, the ethnopop singer Sirusho read the voting results from a clipboard with a photo of the controversial Nagorno-Karabakh symbol on its back, while in the background a giant LCD screen was shown in Yerevan’s republic square with another picture of the symbol. The message for Azerbaijani viewers, and for anyone in any of the 42 countries participating was clear: although located within the internationally recognized borders of the republic of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh is Armenia – and that’s final!

![Figure 4](image.png)

**Figure 4.** Sirusho reads Eurovision votes for Armenia with the national symbol of Nagorno-Karabakh, ‘We Are Our Mountains’, in the foreground and background

Since the singer Sirusho soon after married the son of the first president of Nagorno-Karabakh and former president of Armenia Robert Kocharyan, we may speculate whose idea it was to stage this spectacle, which seeks to humiliate Azerbaijani viewers for the televisual world stage – was it an order...
from on high? Since the realms of oligarchy, media, politics and commerce are largely inseparable in Armenia, it might not be possible to get a clear answer to this question. In any case, the preoccupation with this symbol remained a staple of Armenian popular culture. Less than a year after this event, for the occasion of an annual pan-Armenian fund-raising media event, the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund commissioned a song by the sisters Inga and Anush Arshakyan, which was arguably the most popular ethnopop song in Yerevan during my stay, called ‘We Are Our Mountains’, after the monument. Predictably, the lyrics sing of ‘our Nagorno-Karabakh’ (Artsakhe mer) and the music video pictures the singers around various touristic sites in the territories that are known as ‘liberated’ in Armenian discourse and as ‘occupied’ in Azerbaijani vocabulary. The promotional campaign for the album with the same name sheds some more light on why these strange bedfellows, irredentism and commerce, go together so well in today’s Armenian culture industry.

On this poster, we encounter the silhouette of the ‘We Are Our Mountains’ monument once more, with the actual monument in the distant background. The heads of the singers are arranged in the shape of what are colloquially called the papik and tatik (grandfather and grandmother) of Nagorno-Karabakh. One interpretation of the monument I’ve heard stresses the autochthony of the Armenians in the region: only the heads are shown, to stress how much ‘our ancestors’ are rooted in the land of Karabakh. What is interesting is that the album so overtly targets the markets of both the republic and the diaspora: the artwork features both Latin and Armenian script, and the album even has two titles – one for the Armenian-speaking market, Menq enq mer sarere (‘We Are Our Mountains’), and another for
the market of English-speaking Armenians, ‘Heartbeat of My Land’. If the war from 1988 to 1994 had not taken place, this focus on Nagorno-Karabakh in ethnopop culture would not have been likely, for the situation of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh was virtually unknown to most Armenians in both the Soviet republic and the diaspora until the late 1980s (de Waal 2003). In the war, however, some of the most prominent self-styled fedayi fighters came from the diaspora, such as the California-born commander Monte Melkonian who is famous as a ‘born-again’ national subject, having only discovered (or invented) himself as an Armenian late in life upon discovering the tragic history of the genocide. At the same time, I have often heard the political powers of today’s Armenia being referred to as the ‘Karabakh-clan’, as indeed two out of three presidents of the post-Soviet Armenian republic were born in Nagorno-Karabakh when it was still an autonomous region in the Azerbaijani SSR.

The Nagorno-Karabakh question in many ways unifies the two blocks of Armenianness: for Armenians from the republic, the issue was at the heart of their struggle for independence from Soviet-rule in the late 1980s, whereas the anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan during this time were routinely referred as a continuation of the 1915 genocide. Indeed, people from Azerbaijan are as habitually referred to as ‘the Turks’ as are those from Turkey, thus establishing a méconnaissance (Ohnuki-Tierny 2004) which constitutes a strong receptivity among the descendants of genocide survivors in the diaspora. Sometimes this constructed continuity even leads to a sense of retaliation: the idea that heroic Armenians averted a second genocide by ‘the Turks’, in which the sense that this eternal victim nation could finally win a war is framed as a revitalizing victory. A diasporan Armenian from California explained to me that the Azerbaijanis lost the war because “they have nothing to fight for, it’s not their land. Their soldiers are paid to fight, whereas ours are volunteers who fight with all their heart for their historic homeland. That’s the reason they will lose again if ever war breaks out in the region.”

Upon asking a music video director why he had prominently put a picture of ‘Greater Armenia’, six times the size of the current republic, in the background of one of his latest ethnopop music videos, the answer was that he really didn’t care much for such things himself, but that it always strikes a sentimental chord with Armenian audiences. Much to my surprise, he admitted he had included it for commercial reasons. “Basically, the market determines what we make,” his producer added. Here, we may note that it is the addition of a diaspora market, often even more occupied with irredentist issues than the republic’s, to a national market, which works in favor of making Armenian cultural productions so preoccupied with the lands to be redeemed, much like the picturing of old monasteries and cross stones in the artwork for duduk CDs and tapes seeks to target both the rural nostalgia of Armenians in the republic and the karot for an authentic homeland of the diaspora (Nercessian 2000).

But seen from a consumer perspective, this does not mean that such ethnopop productions sell because these people are merely manipulated or have a ‘false consciousness’. The market for which irredentist symbols are shown in the Eurovision song contest and maps of ‘Greater Armenia’ are
broadcast in music videos is not entirely the result of the ideological molding by a deceptive culture industry, as Adorno would have it. People are genuinely proud that their ill-fated nation has for once emerged victorious over ‘the Turk’, a victory that is conceptualized as a mere defense against an aggressor, and they feel good when seeing the reassembled bits and pieces of their vast national heritage enacted. The glorification of Nagorno-Karabakh as inalienable part of Armenia also serves to justify that the tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands expelled in the early 1990s (de Waal 2003: 270) have not been ‘for nothing’. The various stakeholders, ranging from political elite to record companies and community centers in the diaspora, all seem to benefit from exploiting these sensitivities both politically and commercially for their own agenda, but the objective history which has shaped the subjective predispositions of both producers and audiences plays an equally important role in this whole phenomenon of ethnopop irredentism. In order to balance the picture of propagandist purpose and profit with one of the origins of such subjective predispositions, it may prove worthwhile to look more into the lives of those ethnopop singers who perhaps most strongly identify themselves as representing the lost territories of ‘historic’ Armenia. This issue will be explored in the following section by embedding it in larger issues concerning the relation between media, collective memory and the imagination.

3.2. **TELEVISUAL MNEMOTECHNICS: REVITALIZING THE HERITAGE OF SASUN**

During the last century, many a nostalgic cultural theorist (e.g. Guy Debord, Frankfurt School) has lamented how in our times, all social relations have become mediated by the phantasmal images of mass mediated culture. In the work of Jean Baudrillard there is not even an original authenticity that we can return to in order to escape this alienation, even though we attempt to more than ever and “pastiche and nostalgia” have become “central modes of image production and reception” (Appadurai 1991: 3). If we are to understand the condition of our age as one in which “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices” (ibid. 5), it might prove fruitful to make a comparison with earlier times in which the cultivation, juxtaposition and manipulation of images in the imagination were central concerns for thinkers. And if collective memory is “not an accumulation of individual recollections” but rather “includes all the activities that go into making a version of the past resonate with group members” (Till 1999: 254), and if the transmission of such a narrative of the past is at least partially orchestrated by the manipulation of images through mass media, as in the case of Armenia, it is worth having a look at earlier traditions in western thought of constructing an ‘artificial memory’ through the mediating work of striking imagery.

Most likely, Aristotle would not have been surprised by the notion of mediation as a “general

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17 The term ‘artificial’ (memory), like ‘imagined’ (communities), is not used in the sense of an ‘unreality’ in opposition to the really real, but in the sense of something being constructed by social agents.
foundation of social life” (Mazzarella 2004). For the Greek philosopher from Macedonia, access to the external world through the senses always depends on the mediation by a *sensus interior*, the imagination, which translates the sense impressions of the body into phantasms that are comprehensible to the soul (Couliano 1987: 5, Yates 1966: 32). Our knowledge of the world is thus “fundamentally constituted (and not just reconstituted) through mediation” (Mazzarella 2004: 357), whatever the social circumstances. “Imagination,” for Aristotle, “is the intermediary between perception and thought …. It is the image-making part of the soul which makes the work of the higher processes of thought possible” (Yates 1966: 32).

For much of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, phantasmal images were consciously cultivated by learned individuals ranging from rhetoricians and scholastic thinkers to esotericists, in elaborate memory systems that are sometimes grouped together under the concept of mnemotechnics, or *ars memorativa*. In her seminal study *The Art of Memory*, the historian Frances Yates traces a series of texts from Cicero to Giordano Bruno, showing how the cultivation and manipulation of an extensive system of images in the imagination was held in high esteem in learned circles. The basic system is as follows:

> [P]ersons desiring to train this faculty [of memory] must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store those images in the places, so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things, and the images of the things will denote the things themselves. (Cicero, quoted in Yates 1966: 2)

Initially, the art of memory is used as a pedagogical tool for rhetoricians who thus manage to memorize long speeches through the cultivation of striking imagery. During their speeches these rhetoricians would perform an ‘interior walk’ through their memory palaces, stumbling upon “human figures, active, dramatic, striking, with accessories to remind of the whole ‘thing’ which is being recorded in memory” (Yates 1966: 12) to externally reproduce the words they had prepared. During the Renaissance, this utilitarian aspect gives way to a cosmological, and ultimately, magical conception of memory. Influenced by Platonist and Hermetic traditions, in which ‘recollection’ is conceived of as “fitting the imprints from sense impressions on to … the higher reality of which the things here below are reflections” (ibid. 36), the art of memory in the Renaissance becomes the organization of an interior microcosm, governed by highly systematized arrangements of planets, angels, and other occult forces that are visualized in the imagination and thought to reflect a cosmic order.

During my fieldwork, I was first reminded of the memory palaces in the Western tradition of mnemotechnics after I witnessed a music video called *Sasna Par* (‘Dance from Sasun’) by ethnopop singer Ruben Sasuntsi featuring DJ Aratta. In this video, a large dreamlike building of a seemingly endless series of domes and pillars is populated with dancers wearing various folkloric costumes from
the region of Sasun in Western Armenia (i.e. Eastern Anatolia, now in Turkey). In the middle of the building, there is a large banner with the following text, which is also read aloud in the song’s introduction:

The source of all this springs from our ancestors. Our dance is not merely a dance! It’s a spirit; it’s a quality. It’s something Armenian. It’s a way of life; it’s ours. Dance, my boy, learn our dances and transfer them to the generations to come.

Although it is located about 400 kilometers west of the current borders with Turkey, the region of Sasun has been central to Armenian national folklore from the Middle Ages onwards and remains so to our day. The medieval national epic, Daredevils of Sasun or David of Sasun, of which an animated version was just released in the cinemas during my stay in Yerevan, recounts the lives and adventures of several generations of superhuman warriors who successfully manage to protect the region from a series of foreign threats ranging from the caliph of Baghdad to the Mamluks of Egypt. The warriors from Sasun in the epic are characterized by being **tzur** (literally ‘bent’, denoting a mixture of courage and craziness – it is usually translated as ‘daredevil’), by their superhuman strength and by their impeccable ethics:

The ‘giants’ of Sasoun did not make war of their own volition. When they were forced to do battle, they had only one objective: it was to defend their people, their country and their independence. In defeat, the heroes of Sasoun become complacent, having no illusions about their fate, but in victory they make only minimal demands from their opponents, usually to return to their own country and refrain from attacking Sasoun. (Gulbekian 1984: 106)

Much like the medieval epic, the Armenians of Sasun were included in national folklore for their bravery in the decades leading up to the genocide. As second-class subjects of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians and other Christian peoples were heavily taxed, had no political rights and became increasingly the victim of mass violence. As a result of what came to be known as the Hamidian massacres, in the period from 1894 to 1896, “2,500 towns and villages had been plundered, 456 villages forced to convert to Islam, 649 churches and monasteries desecrated and 328 churches converted to mosques” (Panossian 2005: 162-163). In 1894 and in 1904, the Armenians of Sasun were one of the few communities that managed to resist Turkish armies and Kurdish militias with some degree of success, with the involvement of some of the most celebrated *fedayi* guerrilla commanders.

Now let us return to the music video for ‘Dance from Sasun’. Upon entering the building, the singer’s formal dress, black suit and white collar, is instantly transformed into a bright red folkloric shirt. For the remainder of the video, the singer stumbles upon a series of middle aged and older men who teach him how to perform the traditional warrior dances of the region: the *yar khushta, msbo kher*
and papuri. A second line of video footage shows the singer with DJ Aratta with a mixer and turntable in front of a large video screen with a map of Eastern Anatolia marked as ‘Greater Armenia’, making jubilant and victorious hand gestures as if these territories in Turkey, which were indeed largely populated by Armenians before the genocide, could be won back by performing the warrior dances correctly on television.

Born in a small village largely composed of genocide survivors from this region and their descendants, Ruben Sasuntsi is a representative of a veritable subgenre of ethnopop that has come to prominence in Armenian communities during the last few years. Together with artists such as Sasno Tgha, Gohar Hovhannisyan and Aghasi Ispiryan, these Sasun singers devote their entire musical career to the perpetuation, reinvention and revitalization of the cultural heritage from this region, which has not been populated by Armenians for nearly a century but still manages to keep its reputation of bravery and heroic acts in the popular imagination. Their music videos can be seen as externalized, mediated memory palaces in which the entirety of objects and symbols exposed seeks to produce a sense of totality of the culture of the lost territories of Western Armenia in the beholder, with the connotations of heroism attached. Much like the pre-modern tradition of mnemotechnics, an ‘artificial memory’ is consciously designed by experts in the mediation of the imagination through the use of vivid imagery and symbolism. It is not the utilitarian use of such imagery for the remembrance of trivial things, as proposed by Cicero, but rather memory as a cosmological order structuring a collective imaginary, as in the platonic mnemotechnics of the Renaissance. In a certain sense, it is a mass mediated mnemotechnics of collective memory that we see at work here, if we understand the latter not as concerning individual recollections but rather as "the dynamic process by which groups map myths (in an anthropological sense) about themselves and the world onto a specific time and place" (Till 1999: 254).

What is interesting about the Sasun singers is their claims to continuity and a legitimacy of representation for a region that has been cleansed of Armenians for nearly a century, although the singers are all young Armenians in their twenties or thirties. When I interviewed Ruben Sasuntsi, he professed that he did not yet have a chance to actually visit Sasun, but that he was born and raised in a small village largely composed of genocide survivors from this region and their descendants, and that the traditions of Western Armenia were still kept strong on a day to day basis. During the war for Nagorno-Karabakh, he assured me, the warrior dances shown in the music video for ‘Dance from Sasun’, such as the yar khushta, were still performed by brave villagers upon leaving for the war to fight ‘the Turks’, as the singer calls the Azerbaijanis. This dance, in which two men or groups of men “compete against one another by tapping the opponent on the palms” and “rhythmic claps and strokes symbolise an armed fighting” (Khatchatryan 1991: 405), is itself a symbol much depicted in objects for redemptive consumption targeted for tourists from the diaspora. In a miniature-painting souvenir I bought on the Vernissage market in Yerevan, the sense of returning to Western Armenia is accentuated
by portraying the twin peaks of Mount Ararat in an inverted fashion, i.e. as they can only be seen from across the Turkish border.

![Image of a souvenir miniature painting portraying the warrior dances of Sasun, Western Armenia, now in Turkey.](image)

**FIGURE 6.** A souvenir miniature painting portraying the warrior dances of Sasun, Western Armenia, now in Turkey

The main reason for Ruben to sing his songs is to keep the memory of the culture of his ancestors alive. When I told him that his music, which is characterized by shrill *zurna* melodies, electronic dance rhythms, and a prominent use of quarter tones, reminded one of my Armenian informants very much of Arabic pop music, he grew visibly irritated and reproached my friend *in absentia* for her lack of capacity to detect authentic Armenian folk culture. Upon assuring him that she is nevertheless an Armenian born in Yerevan, he made the following statement:

> Every generation has its own lifestyle, attitude, and clothing style. We don’t walk around in traditional folkloric costumes anymore here; we wear modern clothes. But the songs I sing are true folk songs of our ancestors from Sasun, which have been performed in the same manner for centuries. In my music, the melodies or lyrics are not changed at all. The electronic instrumentation only functions to make it a more attractive, more accessible, to the current generations. Of course, you cannot expect young people today to play a song recorded with just a *dhol* [frame drum] and the *duduk* in their cars.

Ruben was quite convinced of the effect his productions have on perpetuating the heritage of Sasun for current generations of Armenians. Indeed, he told me that he himself had witnessed children in villages in Armenia who taught themselves these old dances by watching his music videos, and thus physically enact and embody a collective memory that is discursively framed as ancient Western Armenian tradition. On the other hand, he also had to acknowledge that the kind of highly stylized...
folkloristic weddings he portrays in his music videos probably does not exist anywhere in Armenia anymore, and in this sense viewed the art of the ethnographic music video as a kind of cultural preservation, storing the memory of endangered traditions and lost territories for generations to come. “I haven’t been to Western Armenia yet, but the stories we hear from there are shocking. Our old churches are deteriorating and used by the locals for keeping livestock,” he assured me to stress the necessity of his mnemonic labor.

Figure 7. Artwork inlay for a cassette tape by Sasno Tgha portraying the traditional folkloric dress of the Sasun region

In the music videos and artwork of other Sasun singers, the metaphor of the mnemotechnics of Antiquity and the Renaissance, in which “[t]here is no artificial memory without very strong affectivity” and “emotionally charged images,” (Couliano 1982: 102) may again serve to elucidate the mechanics of a collective imaginary. “In isolated mountainous regions such as Sassoun in Western Armenia, homespun woolen cloth was made into wide, striped trousers for men, who wore them with broad wooden belts and short jackets,” (Poghosyan 181-182) as can be seen in the music videos of Aghasi Ispiryan and the artwork for a cassette by Sasno Tgha. These can be conceptualized as sensational forms (Meyer 2009) providing access to a world that no longer physically exists, and yet continues to live on in the collective imagination. Computer-generated, flickering traces of medieval manuscripts are projected onto the shady walls of a deserted church interior in the music video for the song Mayro by Aghasi Ispiryan, and the song is followed by an instrumental, educational epilogue drawing attention to the most legendary lost lands of Western Armenia in a nutshell: Ararat, Ani, the fields of Mush, the
bridge of Sulukh, Berkri Falls, the island Akhtamar. “Among the places most favored in Armenian historical memory, only Mount Ararat [which, again, is pictured in its inverted perspective as seen from current-day Turkey in the music video, R.A.] and the island of Aghtamar on Lake Van can with equal force give flight to Armenian nostalgia and imagination [as Ani].” (Payaslian 2007: 66).

Whether there is a strong uniformity in terms of the meaning that is communicated in the productions of the Sasun singers, such as the idea that these lost lands are “awaiting the return of its ‘true inhabitants’” (Panossian 2007: 238), is not something I have been able to verify during the relatively short period of my fieldwork. But what is perhaps more significant, and without any doubt, is the fact that the whole phenomenon of musical and televisual irredentism, like the national pedagogy of television dramas in Egypt studied by Lila Abu-Lughod, “makes available a set of conversations about where the nation is going” (2005: 225). The fact that there is a good deal of variation, division and fragmentation in terms of answers to this question, in spite of the sometimes unequivocal appearance in popular media, will become more apparent in the next section.

3.3. PERFORMANCES OF PRIMORDIALIZATION: EREBUNI AS ‘OLD YEREVAN’ AND THE REBIRTH OF VAHAGN

So far, we have seen how in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh and ‘sea-to-sea’ Armenia, an expanded spatial conception of the nation is articulated and celebrated in mass mediated ethnopop musics. In the case of the Sasun singers, a temporal dimension is added to this symbolic irredentism, as the sudden rupture of the genocide is temporarily negated by presenting audiovisual articulations of the pre-genocide Armenian culture of Eastern Anatolia, providing a mediated virtual reality that serves to revitalize the traditions of Western Armenia nearly a century after the area has been cleansed of its Armenian population. If anything, singers like Ruben Sasuntsi succeed in making its historic legacy and cultural heritage imaginable to current generations of Armenians.

Many Armenians have told me during my stay that they would be curious to visit the region once the borders with Turkey are opened again to see where their ancestors lived. The music video for one popular song during my stay, Krunk (‘Crane’) by Araqs Karapetyan, an ethnopop rendition of a classic patriotic song by Gusan Djivani, is an anticipatory drama building upon recent developments as it preliminarily stages the (as of 2011 still unrealized) scenario of the border opening. In the video, the grandmother of the singer, framed as a genocide survivor, is pictured feeding a crane in her garden, while the song’s lyrics tell about a crane returning to its nest. Later she is shown in tears in front of the television, overwhelmed by black and white footage of the genocide, haunted by traumatic memories, until it is announced that “today, the borders between Armenia and Turkey have been opened. That provides the opportunity for everyone who may desire to do so, to experience everything that was felt when …” – the news reader’s words are faded out, apparently being too much to handle emotionally,
and the old lady in the end is presented with a flight ticket to Los Angeles instead, where her granddaughter lives. The popularity of songs like this point to the fact that the receptivity for dramas of audiovisual repatriation to earlier times and places in Armenian history is related to the extent to which the themes that are the subject of the songs concern the general preoccupations of listeners in their everyday lives, as indeed it is not uncommon to meet people in Yerevan whose grandparents were genocide survivors. The fact that the impact of ethnopop songs depends on the resonance they manage to establish with current realities becomes especially clear when we compare it to instances in which there is a strong cleavage between the ideological message that is sonically communicated and the persuasiveness it has for its listeners.

One such instance could be witnessed during a celebration organized by an ultra-nationalist fringe movement of Armenian neo-pagans at the temple of Garni, a reconstructed Graeco-Roman edifice from Hellenistic times which is also a popular tourist site, located about 30 kilometers southeast of Yerevan. On my first visit to Armenia, I had already visited the place to observe a celebration of the pagan holiday Vardavar. It is here that I first encountered Armenian ethnopop music in an ethnographic setting, when I was invited to a picnic in which toasts to pagan gods such as Astghik, the Armenian version of Aphrodite, were made by a group of people claiming that Armenians are the original Aryans and that, as a Dutch person, the roots of my nation also lie in Armenia. People were listening to and singing along with recordings of patriotic pop songs, while children were throwing water (the main way to celebrate Vardavar), and I had one boy who spoke French write down the name of most the enthusiastically sung-along song for me – the song Artsiv Selatsir (‘Fly, Eagle!’) by Los Angeles based patriotic singer Nersik Ispiryan, whom we already encountered in the music video for Hrant Dink in the previous chapter.

On the 21st of March in 2010, when I had returned to Armenia for my fieldwork, I went back to Garni after hearing rumors that there might be a neopagan celebration like the one I had witnessed earlier, this time for the occasion of the spring equinox. It was early afternoon and the sun was scorching, when the news reached us that, indeed, a ceremony was about to begin. The crowd of about 300 people was a mixture of tourists from Iran, both Armenians and Persians, who were seeking to celebrate their new year, Novruz, and local Armenians enjoying their free Sunday for a picnic, with only a few of the more patriotic ones among seeking a serious engagement with the god Vahagn of their revitalized paganism. One of my friends from Yerevan, a 27-year old girl working in environmental policy named Shamiram, immediately assured me that the whole celebration had absolutely nothing to do with religion: “You simply cannot go much further than the year zero with Christianity, and of course the Armenians like to picture themselves as having at least some 5000 year history. That is the only reason for this kind of celebration, the nationalism.”

This comment echoes a common stereotype about Armenia among the peoples of the Caucasus, namely that Armenian nationalism is characterized by a particularly strong “pioneer
complex” (Abrahamian 2005: 113). To many observers it seems, Marx’s oft-quoted dictum notwithstanding, that in the South Caucasus some people do make (i.e. make up) their own history just as they please (see King 2008; Suny 2001). Within Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani academia, vigorous battles over the historiography of contested regions are fought, akin to the territorial logic of songbirds marking their nesting area or children claiming their part of a schoolyard, in which the most rhetorically sound ‘evidence’ that ‘we were here first’ (‘we’ meaning those bodies coded, postmortem, as national subjects) becomes a legitimizing force to naturalize the notion that a piece of land belongs to a certain nation for all eternity. Although the city of Yerevan is considered the 12th capital in the discourse of the Armenian nation having a long history of ‘moving capitals’, and there is barely any buildings that predate Soviet times in the city, Armenians nevertheless consider their capital one of the oldest cities in the world. During my stay, large banners with the text “Yerevan-Erebuni 2791” could be spotted in the city center, to celebrate the fact that 2791 years ago the nearby city of Erebuni in the pre-Armenian kingdom of Urartu was founded. This ancient kingdom has itself been vigorously ‘Armenianized’ in recent decades, with nationalist historians renaming it the ‘Araratian kingdom’ and thus inserting the national symbol of today’s Armenia into pre-Armenian times (Abrahamian 2005: 11).

One popular nostalgic ethnopop video, Yerevan-Erebuni, renders a sentimental poem of Paruyr Sevak into a song, the subtext of which is that cities like Ani, Dvin and Yerevan were all already contained in the Urartian city of Erebuni, and thus stretches the temporal borders of the modern Armenian nation back far into Antiquity.

The famous romance novel of the Caucasus, Ali and Nino, written under the pseudonym Kurban Said by Jewish author Lev Nussinbaum and offering a rich resource for the cultural stereotypes of the various peoples of the South Caucasus region at the dawn of the 20th century, also reflects this preoccupation. One of the chapters retells how the main character, a young Azerbaijani nobleman named Ali Shirvanshir, visits the town of Shusha in Nagorno-Karabakh and meets some of the local Armenians:

It really was amazing, what wonderful liars these people were. There is no story they would not invent to glorify their country. Only yesterday a fat Armenian tried to tell me that the Christian Maras Church in Shusha was five thousand years old.

"Don’t tell such tall stories," I told him. "The Christian Faith is not yet two thousand years old. They can’t have built a Christian church before Christianity was even thought of."

The fat man was very hurt and said reproachfully:

"You are, of course, an educated man. But let an old man tell you: The Christian Faith may be only two thousand years old in other countries. But to us, the [Armenian] people of Karabagh, the Saviour showed the light three thousand years before the others. That’s how it is." (Said [1937] 1970: 43)

The neo-pagans present at Garni were not entirely unlike this hyperbolic illustration, drawn from a
work of fiction, of the Armenian predilection for national projections back in time. How are we to make sense of such mythico-historic imaginings? Since nations “have no clearly identifiable births,” (Anderson 1991: 205) it is not surprising that different myths of ethnogenesis can coexist for a single nation. In an article named *The Past as Nation: Three Dimensions of Armenian Identity*, Razmik Panossian has described three different ‘root paradigms’ that suffuse contemporary narrations of Armenian nationness, each epitomized by its own key date of commencement: 301, the year which has traditionally (and, in all likeliness, erroneously\(^{18}\)) been referred to as the year of Armenia’s conversion to Christianity, underlying the claim that Armenia is the first Christian nation; 4000 B.C. or earlier, a hardline patriot’s ‘fringe’ paradigm which projects Armenianness back into the pagan times of prehistory, and 1915, the year of the commencement of the genocide which deprived Armenia of over a million lives and most of its traditionally inhabited territory.

**Figure 8.** Three teams of children from the patriotic youth organization ‘Armenian Knight’ practice forming the Armenian tricolor at the Garni temple

At Garni, it was clearly the second paradigm that was mobilized by the group of nationalists who were enacting their performance of primordialization. A recording of children singing patriotic songs was played: “Forward, forward, forward, Armenia!” Three teams of the H1 patriotic television quiz and youth organization *Hay Aspet* (‘Armenian Knight’) were rehearsing how they were to form the pattern

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\(^{18}\) A distinction can be drawn between a popular mythico-historical version and the Western academic’s historiographical version of Armenia’s conversion to Christianity – in the former variant, involving the transformation of a pagan king into a wild boar, the date is 301; in the latter, drawing upon a less dramatic narrative of politico-strategic motives, the conversion is nowadays commonly dated ca. 314-315 (Panossian 2002: 126; Payaslian 2007: 35).
of the three-colored flag while holding lit lanterns on the stairs of the temple, during the sermon of the neopagan priest. A giant flag was being waved above the crowd, and I soon spotted some of the people I had seen here on my first visit a year and a half earlier – including a middle-aged mustached man wearing a necklace with a golden swastika, the man claiming it was an old Armenian symbol, the meaning of which had been perverted by the Nazis. If this was a religious gathering in any meaningful sense, which my Armenian friend had already denied, it was an even more blatantly nationalist manifestation of religion than the patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church I had witnessed on television a few months earlier, when he spoke out “a thousand times no” against any reconciliation with Turkey before recognition of the genocide had taken place.

After a while, a middle aged singer wearing a black suit ascended the temple stairs, a backing track featuring an electronic folk pop accompaniment was put on, and he started singing the following text in Grabar, the Classical Armenian language, from the 5th century text History of the Armenians by Movses Khorenatsi, which contains the only remaining descriptions of pre-Christian Armenian paganism, describing the birth of the god Vahagn:

> Parturient heaven, parturient earth, parturient also the crimson sea.  
> In its labours lay in the sea also the Carmine reed.  
> Smoke rose from the reed, a flame rose from the reed.  
> And from the flame, a red haired boy escaped. Hair he had of fire,  
> Also a beard he had of flames, and his eyes were suns.

Then a self-styled pagan priest ascended the stage, wearing sunglasses and red garments, and started a sermon praising not only the ancient Armenian god Vahagn, but also the glory of the Armenian nation as an Aryan nation. He retold how the fedayi commander Garegin Nzhdeh was visited by the god Vahagn on a mountain during the early 20th century. Nzhdeh is infamous for having collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, and yet is much worshipped as a heroic figure in contemporary Armenia for his militant defense of the southern province Zangezur, which almost ended up becoming Azerbaijani territory in the early 1920s. Indeed, I later learned that the Order of Armenian Aryans, which organized the event, is closely allied with the ideology of ‘Nzhdehism’ and its tsegbakron (‘race-worship’) political religion.

19 The date is, again, contested – some scholars outside Armenia, most notably Robert Thomson, have claimed it might have been written as late as the 8th or 9th century CE (see Khorenatsi 1978: 1-62).
21 The intricate time manipulations of its adherents are not limited to ritual performances. Sympathizers of the movement even introduced an Armenian calendar chronology based on the mythico-scientific calculations of the 18th century priest Mikayel Chamchian, taking the mythical battle between Haik and Bel, 2492 B.C. according to Chamchian, as the ‘birth of the nation’ and foundation for its numbering system (Panossian 2002: 130). Thus the year 2010 would be noted by some ultra-nationalists as 4502 bun hayots (real Armenian).
This episode may be seen as another instance of audiovisual time travel, but not one that responds well to the ‘aesthetics of persuasion’ (Meyer 2010) of most of the crowd present at the celebration. Although the text from the early medieval History of the Armenians, a book about which I was told patriotic teachers in schools urge their pupils to read it before going to bed every night, is recognized by many, the equally amused and disinterested attitude of most viewers to the neo-pagan spectacle demonstrated how reality “has a force of its own and … often displays its refusal to conform to whatever individual or collective stories have been made to accommodate it” (van de Port 1998: 30). The performances of primordialization by the ultra-nationalists at Garni seemed not in any way to connect to the everyday mundane problems of most Armenians I met, many of whom were not even conscious that there is such a thing as Armenian neopaganism, and those who did witness it saw it is a folkloristic curiosity.

Besides the neopagan gathering and the odd reference to the prehistoric Urartian city of Erebuni as ‘old Yerevan’ in patriotic ethnopop songs, pre-Christian references are few in Armenian popular culture. When they arise, it is most often in controversies concerning the ‘true’ ownership of a piece of land, as in the historiographical battles that were characteristic of the ‘academic war’ of Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars over Nagorno-Karabakh (see de Waal 2003: 145-158). For a lack of notated music from the region’s antiquity, without a musical heritage capable of being ‘nationalized’, controversies over the appropriation of prehistory do not spill into the audiovisual domain of ethnopop with the same intensity as do more recent contestations with Turkey over the depopulated territories of Eastern Anatolia.

3.4 **Theoretical Interlude: Symbolic Irredentism and Virtual Repatriation**

As we have seen, modern technology makes it possible to create mass mediated simulations of the traditions, episodes and territories of ‘historic’ Armenia as entertainment for a variety of audiences. The mediated articulations circling around the theme of lands and pieces of history ‘waiting to be redeemed’ could be coined instances of symbolic irredentism, in which the ideology that territories lying outside a state’s borders should be acquired to recover the ‘wounded’ nation’s collective body from the amputations of an unjust history is seen to be transformed into audiovisually mediated performances. While the instances of televisual mnemotechnics usually last little more than a few minutes, the routine incorporation of such themes into the fabric of Armenian media space nevertheless is an important factor in deterritorializing the nation from the scope of its present state into an expanded conception in the popular imagination. By offering sensational forms authorized by appeals to a traumatic history, such mass mediated articulations are one of many in the polyphony of utterances that come together in the production of particular truths in the everyday lives of social actors.

These expressions of symbolic irredentism, as ‘griotic’ instances of mediation exploring the
tensions between the nation’s present and past, and the political and the poetic (Stoller 1994: 358), straddle the boundaries between the imagination and everyday realities of audiences, while retaining the mundane mood that is typical of “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995). In the case of the Sasun singers’ music videos ‘re-Armenianizing’ an area in modern day Turkey, and the Eurovision performance boldly claiming Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, as Armenia, such experiences of virtual repatriation come to be distributed on a large scale into the living rooms of national subjects. The widely varying reception to the neo-pagan performance, however, shows the creases in the fabric of a unifying national cosmology by exposing the division between different groups of Armenians in the particular mythico-histories with which they identify in order to ‘root’ their national imaginings.

In a discussion of Anthony Giddens’ analysis of modernity, ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes has pointed to precisely this capacity of music to effectuate a ‘relocation’, which, he adds, echoes the general “separation of space from place” (1992: 3) characteristic of modernity. “The musical event,” Stokes writes, “from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity.” (ibid.). As we have seen in the case of a politicized music that is consciously designed to evoke a sense of a specific place and historical moment, such ‘artificial’ memories are stylized by a variety of forces, from propagandistic to commercial, structuring the configurations of sonorous and semiotic elements. By presenting a ‘national culture’ audiovisually framed on the territory of a neighboring state, history is staged as a moral arbitrator assigning the land back to its ‘proper proprietor’ in the grand cosmological scheme of things.

The musical mediation of collective memory through a ‘spatiotemporal sense’ of nationhood involves the much-discussed ‘schizophonic’ mobility of musical elements in which sounds are no longer “linked indexically … to their time and place, their sources, their moment of enunciation, their human and instrumental mechanisms” (Feld 1995: 97). The songs from the Sasun singers, presenting a reinvented musical heritage for the region, are surely not recorded in Turkey, and indeed Ruben Sasuntsi had never crossed the physical borders to Eastern Anatolia.22 In the case of Armenian ethnopop singers’ irredentist imaginings of Turkey and de facto Azerbaijan, however, it is the negotiation of histories of genocidal violence and conflicting territorial claims that lead to a “musical construction of place” (Stokes 1992), rather than an impersonal disjunction of space and place that can be ascribed to processes of global interconnection. The preoccupation with stretching the boundaries of the nation’s collective self-representations, be they temporal as in the musical rendering of Urartian Erebuni as ‘old Yerevan’, or spatial as in ethnopop songs about a ‘sea-to-sea’ Armenia, cannot be understood without being aware of the mobilization of history by a wide range of actors, for the

22 In spite of the closed borders, it is possible for Armenians with an Armenian passport to visit Turkey over land by travelling via Georgia. The same is not true for Armenians wanting to visit Azerbaijan.
political purposes and “struggles over history and truth” (Malkki 1995: 1) that have come to characterize the identity project of Armenian communities worldwide. Thus, having looked into the musical malleability of the spatiotemporal boundaries of a nation’s collective imaginary in a political context of rigidly guarded, and indeed, as of 2011, still closed borders, I can agree with a statement from Philip Bohlman’s engaging study of nationalist music in 20th century Europe, namely that:

Above all, nationalist music may contribute to the struggle over contested territory such as border regions. Possessing music becomes like possessing land: Necessarily one must claim it as one’s own. To discover nationalist music, we seldom need to look much farther than those places where there are competing historical claims for land. (2004: 119)
4. AESTHETIC BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS: ON ORIENTOPHILES, OLIGARCHS AND COSMOPOLITANS

In autumn 1999, a pamphlet with the following text was spread by the youth organization of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Lebanon:

Struggle against Turkish television channels!
Struggle against Turkish-sounding songs!
Struggle against Turkish-inspired appearances!
Struggle against Turkish products!...
Let us not forget our centuries-old culture.
Let us not forget the memory of 1.5 million victims of the Genocide...
Let us not forget that Turkey is our enemy. (cited in Panossian 2007: 303)

As we have seen in the analysis of propaganda posters about the imminent border opening and music videos portraying ‘the Turk’ as a categorical Other in previous chapters, such anti-Turkish utterances were similarly prominent in both public space and media space during my fieldwork in Yerevan. What is especially striking in the pamphlet cited here is the implicit motif of cultural contagion – the struggle promoted by the Armenian youth organization is not against the Turkish people, but against the penetration of its sounds, products and appearances into Armenian communities. The subtext of such statements seems to be a fear of mimetic contagion: appreciation of the music of ‘enemy’ cultures potentially runs the risk of appropriation and imitation, thus shunning the clear boundaries guarding the essentialized dichotomies that underlie nationalist discourse. Such sentiments could also be witnessed concerning the music of Azerbaijan in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh:

In [rural areas of Armenia bordering Azerbaijan], prior to the war with Azerbaijan over Mountainous Gharabagh [i.e. Nagorno-Karabakh], the Azerbaijani mughams were … popular; many truck drivers were said to have welded their radio dials to the spot where they picked up the Baku radio programs. During the conflict, however, they had to “free” their radio dials, since this genre became … considered politically incorrect. (Abrahamian 2005: 101)

In both of the aforementioned cases, a politicization of taste is initiated in order to establish clear boundaries between a moral ‘we-group’ and its Others. But can such a project ever succeed? Surely, as we shall see, reality has a habit of getting in the way when categorical grids are to be rigidly implemented in the everyday practice of social actors. “The encoding and enactment of classifications and cosmologies … inevitably generate puzzles, anomalies, liminal categories, vacant and fuzzy spaces,
which may be seen as requiring correctives and avoidances or as enabling creative constructions and transformations” (Tambiah 1985: 4).

The role of aesthetics in policing the borders between the imagined communities of Armenia and its Others may lead one to extrapolate from Pierre Bourdieu's theories of distinction, largely focused on discussions of social class, towards mechanisms that operate in the realm of ethnonational conflict. “Taste,” the French sociologist asserts, “is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs, of continuous distributions into discontinuous oppositions; it raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions” (1984: 174). Thus, inquiring into a politicized aesthetics of mass culture may serve to elucidate one mechanism underlying Fredrik Barth’s assertion that it is at the boundaries separating dichotomous conceptions of community that the most vital sources of identificatory repertoires may be constituted. Such aesthetic boundaries, and the concomitant politicized aesthetics implied in their maintenance, demonstrate that “categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information” (1969: 9), as an isolationist conception of cultural distinctiveness would imply. Rather, it is precisely through a reflection on and orientation towards the Other, be it mass mediated and imaginary or through actual contact, that we find the mechanisms of distinction that operate in the constitution of nationness.

Indeed, one of the main themes that emerged during my fieldwork is that of a strong politicization of musical taste, in which the ethnopop style rabiz becomes a marker for everything that is considered ‘wrong’ and ‘out of place’ in Armenia today, and extending, depending on the interlocutor, to such wide ranging issues such as politics, fashion, architecture, and attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Rabiz, in a sense, is cosmopolitan because of its appropriation of that which lies outside Armenia’s imaginary boundaries, be they occidental or oriental. But it cannot be said to be opposed to the more nation-bound folkloristic and patriotic ethnopop manifestations discussed in the previous chapters, for few of its performers and aficionados will accept the elitist claim that it is an un-Armenian music. It is a phenomenon much typified by a social conservatism that can hardly be called cosmopolitan either, but its endorsement of conspicuous consumption does entail an entry into a global consumerist imaginary.

Whereas in the previous chapter I have sought to expose the malleability that can be observed at the borders of spatiotemporal self-representations, my focus here is on those ambiguous musical instances in which there is a perceived transgression of, or at the very least a dispute over, the aesthetic boundaries that are thought of as the limits of the myth-symbol complex representing the Armenian nation. The issues of social debate that come together in the rabiz phenomenon that I will treat here are, specifically, the perceived foreignness of its musical elements, its purported role in a ‘melodramatization of consciousness’ (Abu-Lughod 2005) and its uses as a discursive container for a wide range of social discontent. It will become clear that while, at first, the politicization of taste on the
surface may seem to be a unifying mechanism, its effect in practice is fragmenting rather than unifying, and exposes the apparent unity of the nation as artifice. The imagined community of the nation is shown to encompass not one ‘aesthetic formation’ (Meyer 2009), but several conflicting ones. Nevertheless, through mechanisms of méconnaissance, and by mobilizing the nation as a moral category, it remains ‘incontestable’ in spite of its internal divisions.

4.1. **The rabiz debate and the politics of melismatic singing**

Everyone in Yerevan has an opinion on rabiz. The current president Serzh Sargsyan, one linguist informant told me, is “totally rabiz,” primarily because of his poor command of the Armenian language. The new buildings that are being erected in Yerevan for business purposes, one prominent blogger and critic assured me, exemplify a rabiz movement in Armenian architecture, because “they demonstrate no creative inspiration whatsoever,” and are built for oligarchs who are “relatively uneducated and have no taste”. As a genre of music, rabiz is the most popular soundtrack for Armenian celebrations and weddings, both in the republic and the diaspora. In Yerevan, its sounds can be heard in many open-air cafes and restaurants, and its recordings are routinely played in taxis and by minibus drivers. My flatmates and their friends had many different rabiz songs as ringtones on their cellphones, particular ones being assigned to the phone numbers of particular friends, and while walking the streets of Yerevan I could often witness groups of teenagers using their telephones as boom boxes to play rabiz songs, while smoking cigarettes and discussing everyday matters.

Like chalga in Bulgaria (see Buchanan 2006, 2007) and arabesk in Turkey (see Stokes 1992), rabiz has come to designate much more than a musical genre or even a lifestyle; being simultaneously denounced and enjoyed by the masses. Like witchcraft, the accusation of something being rabiz might at times tell us more about ‘the eye of the beholder’ than an actual phenomenon that can be unambiguously located in social reality. To some people, indeed, everything in Armenia has become rabiz. People who initially praised me for my command of the Armenian language, and were pleased to hear that I was engaged in an anthropological study of the nation’s contemporary culture, would at times signal a mixture of shock and contempt, and at other times disbelief and amusement, when I revealed my academic interest in rabiz to them. As the lowest of ‘low culture’, it seemed an absurd topic to import into the lofty ivory towers of science.

In an interview with the glossy magazine *El.Style*, famous rabiz performer Hayk Ghevondyan, better known as ‘Spitaktsi Hayko’ (‘Hayko from Spitak’), shares an anecdote, one of several contradicting ones, on the etymology of the term:

> When [renowned Soviet Armenian composers] Aram Khachaturian and Konstantin Orbelian were walking together near the Yeritasard metro station, they saw some street musicians collecting
money, and asked them what they were playing. They responded: “This is worker’s art [in Russian: rabotniki iskusstvo, R.A.]: rabiz.”

Since Rabis was the name of the “all-union professional organization of ‘arts workers’” (Abrahamian 2005: 98), encompassing the entire Soviet Union since the 1920s, it is unlikely that the term first arose in the event described in the aforementioned anecdote. What is more telling is the singer’s rhetorical eagerness to stage two of the most important Soviet Armenian composers at the dawn of this controversial musical genre, thus providing a prestigious national genealogy for his own much-denounced musical activities. In the fifties and sixties, out of the musicians’ Rabis trade union which specialized in providing music for weddings and funerals, there emerged a distinctive mournful rabiz style in Armenia which ultimately developed into an incorporative style “marked by delicate Oriental harmony and an abundance of melismas, short improvised musical ornamentations, which allow the musician to achieve the desired psychological effect through purely musical means” (ibid. 99, italics in original).

Today’s rabiz can be generally divided into uptempo 6/8 dance songs and slow, melancholic ballads, with a typical accompaniment of electronic keyboard, dhol, accordion and clarinet or zurna, although there are also appropriations of many foreign styles, ranging from belly dance rhythms to tango. The overwhelming majority of rabiz singers are male, as are instrumental rabiz performers, who usually perform solos on wind instruments such as the clarinet and zurna, which, probably because of its phallic shape, is still largely tabooed for female performers to this day (Pikichian 2001). Although every popular rabiz singer will have a few patriotic songs in his repertoire, the vast emphasis is on songs concerning the affective dynamics of interpersonal relationships. But unlike most western pop music, where such a focus tends to entail an overwhelming focus on romance and sexuality, rabiz artists sing as much about the feelings for their friends (usually named akhper, meaning brother) and family (mothers and children especially) as about romantic affairs. It is the sentimental character of these lyrics, combined with the abundance of melismas, derogatively called kliklotsner (‘gurgles’, bubbles), which is perceived as an incorporation of elements from the music of Islamic cultures, that makes the genre aesthetically transgressive, distasteful and even downright threatening to purists.23 Consider the following newspaper editorial, somewhat sympathetically advocating that rabiz should be “studied rather than criticized,” which describes the controversy that arose after a report on National Public Radio “entirely devoted to the discrediting of rabiz music lovers”:

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23 On the other hand, it is not only rabiz aficionados who claim that such ornamentations have long been a part of Armenian folk music, only to be ‘sanitized’ of their oriental character under Sovietization programs. For instance, the renowned biographer of the 18th century Armenian troubadour Sayat Nova, Charles Dowsett, recounts how “[a]t Oxford, in the 1970’s, the present writer entertained a visiting Armenian professor of chemistry who, hearing of his interest in Sayat’-Nova, immediately broke into one of his songs, singing it in the traditional fashion, with all the necessary accidentals and quarter-tones often neglected by Soviet-trained professional singers.” (1997: 3)
The report that was broadcast provoked negative responses among those people who clearly love and listen with pleasure to folk-pop, that is to say, the rabiz genre. The reason for their irritation was the indecent statements broadcast on the radio, that the lovers of rabiz songs and organizers of rabiz concerts must be of Turkish nationality, that there was no Armenian blood but Turkish blood flowing through their veins. Such was the opinion of the publicist broadcast live on air, the writer Vahram Sahakyan, who appealed to citizens to share his views and, henceforth, forbid the organizing of rabiz concerts. The citizens weren’t really worried by V. Sahakyan’s point of view about the genre, but they were offended by the insults addressed to them, and especially by the statement from the broadcast that listeners of the genre must listen to rabiz music in mosques.24

The preoccupation of such publicists with perceived foreign influences seems something of a ‘return of the repressed’ to me, in the sense that its witch-hunt discourse echoes Soviet campaigns that were undertaken in the name of socialist realism. The style and tone of their newspaper denunciations, too, seem to mimic this particular literary tradition of the post-Soviet region. One lengthy denunciation of rabiz, an article named National culture should be guarded like the borders of the state, starts by explaining how throughout history the destruction of a people’s “spiritual identity” has been the most powerful instrument used by conquerors to destroy the independence of subject peoples, and several pages later, having classified the ‘gurgling throat’ (kiklakokord) of rabiz as the most potent internal threat to Armenia’s sovereignty, continues as follows:

And today, that smooth-tongued indecency, transformed into an army of locusts, aims to finally devour the roots of our national song culture. ... What difference is there between a sect and rabiz? There is none. Both of them break up a man’s national character (azgayin anhatakanutyun) and independence, while clouding his brains and soul and gradually enslaving him. Both of them are contagious and develop like an epidemic of estrangement (otaratsman hamacharak).25

Here, one is reminded of the Soviet Minister of Culture Andrei Zhdanov, who in the 1940s maintained that a corrupting cosmopolitanism led composers like Shostakovich and Prokofiev to write flawed music which violated “the fundamental physiology of normal human hearing,” while disturbing the “balance of mental and physiological functions” (cited in Yurchak 2005: 163). Indeed, during these times cosmopolitanism, as opposed to a ‘moral’ Soviet internationalism, was “described as a product of Western imperialism, which, in pursuit of its imperialist goals, strove to undermine the value of local patriotism among the peoples of the world, thereby weakening their national sovereignty” (ibid.). The writings of outspoken critics of rabiz seem to betray a belief in the power of music, perceived as

24 Azg Oratert, 31-03-2006.
'subversive noise', reminiscent of an enigmatic statement voiced by Jacques Attali in his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, namely that “music is a credible metaphor of the real. … It is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society.” (1982: 5). When people expressed their discontent that ‘everything’ is becoming *rabiz*, there seemed to be a role assigned for a ‘bounded’ aesthetics in safeguarding the morality of the nation – as if the shunning of taxonomic purity in music would function as a harbinger of similar categorical confusion and decay in social reality.

Among musicians too, the *rabiz* debate has raged for many years, and one of the most controversial issues concerns the putative translation of Turkish and Azerbaijani songs into Armenian ones. After I had returned from my fieldwork, I witnessed the latest controversy, when the widely respected Armenian folk singer Ruben Hakhverdyan was reported by Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* to have signed a contract with a Turkish recording company. In an interview with *Armenia Now*, Hakhverdyan denied this particular ‘accusation’, but also told that he would not hesitate to sign if such an offer would be made. Furthermore, he expressed his sorrow concerning the terrible state of today’s Armenian music in a provocative manner that is equally offensive to the nationalist cultural elite as it is to *rabiz* aficionados.

I said in that interview that a human being is important for me, his characteristics. Nationalism is a wrong thing. I said that Armenians steal Turkish songs. Whose song is *Sev-sev acher*? It’s Turk Ibrahim’s. I was right to say that, I again defend what I said.26

Interestingly, one *rabiz* keyboardist I interviewed during my fieldwork claimed the exact opposite of Hakhverdyan’s statement, namely that Ibrahim Tatlıses, the arabsk legend from Turkey, had stolen his song from Armenia’s ‘king of *rabiz*’, Aram Asatryan.27

The Turks … as a nomadic and plundering people, didn’t have their own music or art. And today, guess what? They do have it, and they took it from us. We Armenians give away everything we have away very easily, we are a generous people … Take for example the song *Sev-sev acher* (‘Deep dark eyes’) by Aram Asatryan, everyone heard the song for the first time from Aram and everyone knew it is his song. Then suddenly, a year later, they hear it sung by the Turks and noone can prove that they are the ones who stole it. The same happened to Tata Simonyan’s *Anapati Arev* (‘Desert sun’). I don’t know, within us there is, how shall I call it … a ‘self-shame’ (*inqunamachutyun*). We are embarassed by our own art, that’s also why everything is American, European, why we don’t have our own character (*demq*, lit. ‘face’) these days, or at least search only in the past in order to find one.

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27 Here, one is reminded of the documentary ‘This is not your song’ by Adela Peeva, in which the director traces a folk song claimed equally by Turks, Greeks, Macedonians, Serbs, Bosnians and Bulgarians to be truly and exclusively theirs.
The most telling thing here is that Turkish and Armenian ethnopop, in their controversial arabesk and rabiz manifestations, are in many cases simply indistinguishable from one another by any other means than recognizing the language of the lyrics. Indeed, the song that is being claimed by both parties is truly one and the same, in terms of its melodic gestures and rhythmic structure. In fact, many of the negative associations of rabiz in Armenia, including its melismatic style of singing, are also denounced in arabesk music by the intellectual elite in Turkey, where it is considered spoilt by influences from Egyptian film music (Stokes 1992). Thus, the same aesthetic formation can, through discursive mediation, come to generate distinct communities of national belonging. Although we have seen instances in previous chapters of ‘styling the nation’, the nation itself is not a collective style or aesthetics, or even a phenomenon of habitus, since the person who delights in what are purportedly translated renditions of Turkish or Azerbaijani songs will not identify any less with the Armenian nation than the person who experiences a visceral disgust for the sentimental ‘wailings’ of the rabiz singer.

4.2. **Karot and the melodramatization of consciousness**

More so than the perceived appropriation of foreign elements criticized in newspaper editorials, the derogatory jokes and ridicule I noted in everyday conversations regarding the rabiz phenomenon often concerned the highly sentimental nature of its lyrics and, accordingly, its listeners. As already stated, besides a musical genre, rabiz has come to signify a particular lifestyle (which, independent of its musical component, is also sometimes referred to as qurtu) that is at least as controversial as the melismatic vocal embellishment of rabiz singers. One prominent critic, Christian Garbis, a 37-year old journalist who repatriated to Yerevan from the US, sums up the stereotypes regarding its exterior manifestations as follows on his weblog:

> The clothing and grooming styles of men who have an affinity with the music are specific, thus the result has become a kind of uniform. ... Young men wear either black single-breasted suits or faux, sometimes real leather jackets with black trousers or jeans. Dark, rectangular sunglasses and black belts with large, square platinum-colored buckles are worn as accessories. ... Those who can afford an automobile drive the Lada 2107 or the Lada Niva sport utility vehicle. Both vehicles are most always painted bright white, featuring black tinted windows and premium shiny chrome wheels, not to mention custom license plates ... Russian and Turkish words are thrown in for color in everyday conversations.

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28 In my own investigatory juxtaposition of Turkish arabesk and Armenian rabiz, I've discovered some rabiz songs to be veritable medleys of İbrahim Tatlıses songs. For instance, Ve's *Trchunner Lur Berin* combines two songs from Tatlıses’ 1985 classic album *Mavi Mavi*: the introduction from *Yalnizim* is merged with the main melodic themes from *Leylim Ley*. 


dialogue as jargon or figures of speech so frequently that many if asked do not realize the terms they are using are actually foreign.29

As much as I intuitively resist pigeonholing social agents into crude, categorical stereotypes, I quickly learned how acutely observed this description is. The rabiz dress code for males, although I noted a tendency for more colorful shirts (dark purple, especially) during my fieldwork, was simply too ubiquitous to miss. Some other regularly encountered exterior manifestations which can be added to this list are tżtżzakadżev (‘pointed pepper-shaped’) black shoes, which I saw rigorously polished on a daily basis, a penchant for munching on sunflower seeds and playing with tżbekh (prayer beads), and the wearing of conspicuous necklaces, often with a glimmering cross attached. Equally noticeable, there is a propensity for using a distinctive and melodramatic slang: difficult to translate expressions used as routine interjections include mernem qezi (‘I would die for you’), mernem srtid (‘I would die for your heart’) and tsarv tanem (‘Let me take your pain’), while friends refer to each other not only as akhper (‘brother’) but also with terms of endearment such as the Persian jīgyar (‘sweetheart’, lit. ‘heart’ or ‘liver’). The stereotype conception is that especially men of the lower classes and the nouveau riche – and in the case of a post-Soviet context nearly all the exorbitantly rich are ‘newly’ so – fit this description. For females, I was repeatedly told, rabiz and qyartu cannot be bogged down to a formula, although the trained eye would also be able to determine its exterior manifestations simply by noticing its vulgarity and ‘poor taste’. The critiques of rabiz we encountered in the previous section thus refer not only to an unsettling repertoire of ‘foreign’ sonorous elements, but also to what is, from the perspectives of the cultural and nationalist elites, a general social phenomenon characterized by a transgression of the boundaries of ‘good taste’. Interestingly, the vocabulary used to take a stance towards rabiz tends to be one of national terms, regardless of whether the position taken is critical or laudatory. During an interview in an artsy café with a ‘cultured’ crowd, I asked Christian what he would consider the opposite of rabiz culture, something that makes him proud to live in Armenia. He responded:

You know, it is people like we see around us right here. Normal people. They dress normally, not like they are about to attend a funeral. They show some diversity in their style, like in a normal country. ... They [rabiz people] say ‘this is not a real country’, I don't know if you heard it yet, ‘sa iskakan yerkir che’ – I say, then make it into the country you want it to become.

For Christian, one of the worst things he disclosed from the chameleon-like discursive container of rabiz is what he perceived to be an omnipresent attitude of fatalism and despondency in today’s Armenia – a lack of willingness to work hard in order to turn the land into what he perceives to be ‘a real country’. These two characteristics, fatalism and despondency are indeed common themes in rabiz.

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lyrics, but it is unlikely that what a critic from the cultural elite considers ‘a real country’ coincides with the conception of this same term in the social stratum of rabiz aficionados.

When I asked rabiz aficionados what it is that touches them in their favorite songs, they would often stress the proximity of the lyrics and feelings to their own life worlds. For Artashes, a 24-year old boy studying to become a cook, the notion of karot (longing, nostalgia, missing) that is central to the lyrics of many rabiz songs was largely connected to his personal situation: his girlfriend is living 3,000 kilometers away, in St. Petersburg. I have encountered him several times in a state of despair when he didn't have money to go to the internet cafe to chat with her on Skype, let alone any expectation of meeting her again in real life anytime soon. One day he came to me in a very saddened state because it was his girlfriend's birthday and he had managed to get a loan from a pawnshop with which he got 40,000 dram (about 80 euros) of flowers to send to her, but when she realized Artashes would now no longer have money to speak to her on Skype she cursed him for spending such an outrageous amount of money. His friend Davo, who grew up in the same fisher village near Lake Sevan but now lives in Rostov-on-Don in Russia for most of the year, where he makes a living for his family back in the homeland as a construction worker, thought that the popularity of rabiz simply mirrored the miserable situation most Armenians found themselves in, with friends, lovers and families torn apart by the impossibility to make ends meet in Armenia. Neither of them could envision a future for themselves in the country, because of the economic situation and, according to Garo, my other flatmate and a student of economics, the complete control of the Armenian economy by oligarchs and the local mafia made it impossible to start up a company.

Time and again, I had been told that if I was to understand rabiz culture, I would have to make a visit to restaurant Parvana. Located at the edge of the Hrazdan gorge that traverses the city of Yerevan, it is the place where many of the most popular singers of the rabiz ethnopop subgenre regularly perform. Although I had initially planned to arrange my flatmates to join me for this occasion, their repeated last-minute cancelations left me with a cosmopolitan friend who had not visited a rabiz concert before either. Upon telling the taxi driver where we wanted to go, the driver started telling about Parvana’s owner – ‘Lfik’ Samo, an oligarch who famously became rich and earned his nickname through the trade in bras. Although the driver thought that Parvana is one of the best places in Yerevan to party, he was less enthusiastic about this “very bad man” who, for him, represented everything that is wrong in Armenia since the fall of the Soviet Union. After the fall of communism, he told, the country had been taken over by a small group of around six or seven men who continue to abuse their power for their own riches, while the whole country has to suffer for it.

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30 One person who strongly denounced the rabiz phenomenon had convinced me, perhaps jokingly, that the name Parvana actually means ‘pharaoh’ (paravon). The significant role in the Egyptian Fatimid caliphate for Armenians who converted to Islam during medieval times notwithstanding, I later discovered this to be a wholly spurious etymology. No music venue stylized with hieroglyphs and golden cats awaited me. Nevertheless, the eagerness of a critic to ‘orientalize’ this site of pilgrimage of rabiz culture was telling.
As with nearly all taxi drivers I had spoken with, he spoke with much nostalgia about Soviet times, when no one had to worry about money or bread. He did not think much about Parvana, or rabiz music, other than that both of them serve well to have a good time.

At first sight, the most striking thing about restaurant Parvana was its size, with long rows of feast tables easily fitting two or three hundred people to sit and dine, a dance floor with a stage for various performers, and an even larger outdoor area that I learned is only in use during summer. The hall’s reverberating acoustics, combined with lockers at the entrance, fountains, palm trees, and a pool with brightly colored inflatable air castles for the children to play, reminded me more than anything of the ‘faux tropical’ indoor swimming pools I used to visit as a child. On this particular night, Tatoul Avoyan and ‘Spitaktsi’ Hayko were performing many of their most popular songs.

Without a friend I will not bear this life,
Don’t let your name become a mere memory.
I don’t stay indifferent to my grief,
Happiness and holiness, my friend.

You’ve left for countries far away,
Days, months and years have passed by,
Without a brother I am lonely and abandoned,
Oh! Where are you, come to me, my brother.

When I had enough shiny metal,
My friends would say ‘there is no one like you’
But now that I’m in trouble, where are you? (6/8 dance song, Tatoul)

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Our qochari31 is known to the whole wide world … that’s our masculine dance …
Listen Armenians, all over the world … the homeland is calling qochari.
So that we may unite, shoulder-to-shoulder; and grab a dance, the qochari. (line-dance, Hayko)

Rather than an ‘un-Armenian’ phenomenon, or a youth subculture that could be pinned down to a dress code, the prominence of large, extended families dining together struck me as quintessentially fitting ethnographic descriptions of Armenian culture as centered on the observance of kinship roles (see Platz 1996). On the dance floor, a wide age and gender spectrum was represented, although indeed there was also a large presence of young males fitting the clichés of rabiz youth. The combination of

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31 A folk dance traditionally performed especially at weddings, on zurna and dhol, in which dancers move shoulder-to-shoulder, forming a line or circle.
loud music and alcohol in my – and everyone else’s – veins made it something of a daunting task to stick to my plan of raising the controversial issue of the ‘foreignness’ of this musical genre here. My attempts to elevate conversations beyond the usual response to my interest, an obligatory statement that rabiz was simply the Armenian way of having a good time, were met with requests to pose for a photo, or curiosity whether we could become friends on Odnoklassniki, rather than analytical material that I could incorporate into my theoretical musings. And those who criticize rabiz, I was told by one young man, do so only while they are sober; thus they might as well be in the crowd around me. Indeed, while being immersed in the mood of the moment, I could well imagine that even the staunchest critic would forget about purist issues and enter a celebratory mood of amnesia here – giving into a wholly different sense of what it means to be Armenian and, perhaps, even unknowingly dancing to translations of Turkish or Azerbaijani songs, if indeed it is possible to establish a national ‘origin’ or genealogy for folk-pop songs which exist in a panoply of versions straddling geopolitical borders. In any case, in Parvana, the politicization of musical taste seemed to fall on deaf ears.

The difficulties I had with sticking to my pre-set research agenda impelled me to give in to the unfolding dynamics of the social situation, rather than retain my focus on the questions I had prepared in advance. As it often happened in any public setting in Yerevan, my foreign presence attracted a good deal of curiosity about what had brought me to Armenia, and upon confessing my being an ethnographer from Amsterdam on the dance floor of Parvana it was only a matter of moments until I was pulled along to meet a man whose family too, I was told, is living in in the Netherlands. A few days earlier, I had felt perplexed when I ran into a bar in Yerevan named Nijmegen, after a middle-sized city in Holland, its interior complete with a portrait and scarf of its local football team. Now, I was introduced to a man in his thirties who told me his aunt lives in a small provincial town in the south of the Netherlands that was an even more unlikely candidate for a conversation in the mountainous South Caucasus, thousands of kilometers removed from my faraway flat homeland. Before long I was asked, as had happened regularly during my stay in Yerevan, whether I would be able to arrange a visa, so that he could make a visit to Europe and see his family. The frequency with which I had encountered such requests, in juxtaposition with the rabiz songs that were being performed expressing a despondent longing for friends, family and lovers who had left Armenia for communities in the diaspora, made me realize once more how integrally tied to the histories of multilocality and dispersion the whole social setting was. If rabiz was “devouring” Armenian national culture like an “army of locusts,” perhaps this was only so because the national culture endorsed by the elites condemning rabiz had failed to accommodate the everyday problems and preoccupations of those who were struck the most by the social catastrophes and immiseration of the country’s population, following the problematic transition

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32 Odnoklassniki (‘Classmates’) is a highly popular Russian social networking website.
33 The owner of café Nijmegen, I was told, is an Armenian who lives in Germany and Nijmegen is his favorite city.
from Soviet times to independence.

Here one might object that nostalgia for the homeland has been a theme central to Armenian folk poetry since the Middle Ages, as indeed Armenia was already a much ‘dispersed’ and multilocal nation before the 1915 genocide and post-Soviet migration waves (see Panossian 2006). Such classic folk songs, however, seem incapable of appealing to the quotidian quandaries of today’s ‘common folk’ in quite the same way as the song by Tatoul Avoyan cited above. Like the Egyptian television serials studied by Lila Abu-Lughod, what distinguishes the narratives of rabiz songs from the more classical narratives of ‘high art’ is not just their unabashed emotionalism, which in the case of Armenia we will also find in a tradition of troubadour songs harking back to medieval times. Rather, it is the “staging of melodramatic selves” (2005: 119) in the domain of everyday interpersonal relations, which provides a sonorous affective template which might be “engendering new modes of subjectivity and new discourses on personhood” which seem like a distant, excessively sentimental (i.e. lower class) cousin of the bourgeois Self that is “autonomous, bounded, self-activating, verbalizing him/herself” (ibid. 118).

The paradox of the rabiz “melodramatization of consciousness” (ibid.), then, seems to be that a lower class and nouveau riche musical phenomenon which largely exhibits conservative and ‘collectivist’ social values, viz. a focus on traditional kinship roles, a patriarchal attitude towards sexuality, akhperutyun (‘brotherly’ friendship) and patriotism, is condemned for being a backwards, un-Armenian and sentimental phenomenon ‘spoilt’ by foreign influences according to the cultural elite, while at the same time its focus on the realm of the everyday as a site of intense emotionalism might underlie an individualist mode of subjectivity that is counter to the social conservatism of both groups. The everyday backdrops for which rabiz music provides its affective templates is, however, even if the songs themselves are at times inspired by Turkish or Azerbaijani musics, thoroughly shaped by the developments of dispersion and migration that are characteristic of post-Soviet Armenia and its diaspora.

4.3. THE IMAGINARY ELSEWHERE; POPULAR PLEASURES FROM ORIENTAL TO OCCIDENTAL

Besides manifestations of imaginary border crossings towards what may be called the Armenian nation’s ‘actual’ elsewhere, that is to say those compatriots who are living abroad and for whom a feeling of kant is articulated, we can also distinguish an orientation towards an ‘Imaginary West’, signifying “an imaginary place … simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic” (Yurchak 2005: 159). Although the fall of the iron curtain has, in theory, opened up the countries of the former Soviet bloc from their prior isolation, many young people I met in Armenia had never visited another country, or had only visited neighboring Georgia, and would have in all likeliness even had easier access to travel (within the union) during Soviet times. The stories about diaspora Armenians which are habitually woven into the fabric of the republic’s mediascape and also
encountered in most people’s kinship or friend networks thus serve to inform particular imaginings in a way that is not always grounded in experiences of actual contact. For those daydreaming without any actual prospect to making a visit to the affluent abroad, one particularly ‘Armenian’ depiction of an Imaginary West may be manifest in the work of rabiz singers who portray themselves in televisual mini-dramas in which conspicuous consumption is a central theme.

In the spectrum of Armenian ethnopop, there is a particular niche in between the rabiz mainly performed by local artists at restaurants and weddings in the republic on the one hand, and a more cosmopolitan pop music on the other. This type of rabiz epitomized by artists such as Armenchik, Tata Simonyan and Artash Asatryan, is largely identical in its musical idioms but generally less concerned with melodrama and fatalism in its lyrics than that of the singers we scrutinized in the previous section. Many of its artists either live or have lived in the US diaspora, produce a large amount of music videos which are broadcast on Armenian television in both the republic and the diaspora, and they have a strong presence in Armenian show business magazines, which are targeted mostly towards young female audiences. Typically, their music is characterized by a much more thorough mass mediation and cultivation of the codes of ‘stardom’, by creating spectacular music videos and mobilizing the biographies of its performers. According to one ethnopop producer, himself a repatriate from Canada, these artists can make anywhere from 15,000 to 40,000 dollars in concerts that are organized across the diaspora. While I have not been able to verify such figures, the music videos of these artists surely work to reinforce this image, along with enacting a peculiarly Armenian vision of an imaginary West, suffused with conspicuous consumption.

The rabiz song Miami by Artash Asatryan, for instance, tells a rather fantastic story about the singer, who is invited by a Russian girl to fly to Miami for a spontaneous holiday: “She begged me not to refuse, and that I’d leave everything. // And leave for Miami, in the middle of the night.” In the music video that accompanies the song, a scantily clad young girl is pictured on a hotel room bed, talking on the phone with the singer Artash and listening to his music. A few moments later, she is pictured still talking on the phone with him, drinking champagne in the bathtub. The singer is filmed on his way to the airport to visit her. Unlike the nostalgic music videos of a patriotic nature, which we discussed in the modes of televisual emplotment of Armenian mythico-history, here the portrayal of airplanes signifies a departure from rather than a return to the homeland. Upon arriving in Miami, the singer is picked up by the nameless Russian girl, this time sharing the champagne with him in a spacious limousine, unpacking the gifts of perfume and designer clothing bought by her favorite singer. Artash sings, incorporating Russian terms of endearment while stressing his own nationality, to the girl:

My joy, my joy (radost' moya radost' moya),
Your favorite singer is an Armenian.
I'll buy a ticket right now and fly to you.
My lover, my beloved (lyubimaya, lyubimaya),
My beautiful one (krasivaya moya moya),
Your favorite singer keeps his promise.

For Shamiram, one of my friends and key informants from Yerevan who is a dedicated feminist, it is no coincidence that the authors of this song have picked a Russian girl on the one hand, and a physical location in the United States on the other, to embody, as she put it, the “unrestrained, unchanged, unconquered Other” of Armenian fantasies:

We don’t have true up-market luxury, access to the ocean or palm trees in Armenia, of course. So the ideal unrestrained holiday in an unrestrained place for Armenians is the US, because of its reputation of endless material wealth and pleasures. The Russian girl, on the other hand, has been chosen because she is a symbol for unrestrained sex in Armenian male fantasies … It couldn’t have been an Armenian girl, because of the taboo on pre-marital sex, and since Armenian males typically don’t have encounters with American girls, the stereotype of a Russian girl is simply much stronger.34

In spite of the televisual and lyrical staging of American and Russian elements, it would be a mistake to interpret the popularity of rabiz songs like Miami as a sign heralding the dawn of a ‘post-national’ Armenian subject. In his analysis of the imaginary West of the late Soviet period, Alexei Yurchak rightly criticizes the widespread view in theories of globalization that those who appropriate transnational cultural forms in local contexts thereby necessarily pose a challenge to the cultural hegemony of the nation-state. Such a view, according to Yurchak, is problematic because it “posits transnationalism and the nation-state as mutually exclusive, bounded entities that compete with each other … [while] it locates people’s agency and resistance in a cultural sphere somehow suspended outside the nation-state.” (2005: 202). In the case of Armenian ethnopop, the ‘foreign’ elements are not conceptualized as elements in opposition to the national by most rabiz aficionados, although the singer does betray a need to defend himself a priori against such allegations by singing “your favorite singer is an Armenian” to his listeners. While on the surface, a fluid and fragmented cosmopolitanism seems to pervade Asatryan’s song, the singer also stresses in the lyrics that he has left everything behind (implying a return) and mixes the ‘exotic’ symbols of tequila and champagne with more traditional Armenian attributes such as cognac and grapes. Thus, even if the significations on a ground level for such songs may include dreams of leaving Armenia for a place afar, it is not a matter of leaving the nation behind.

Both themes, the deteritorialized sense of Armenian nationhood and the imaginary elsewheres

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34 This is also confirmed by my own observations, namely that many young males in Yerevan (and rabiz aficionados in particular) find that the ideal of pre-marital chastity only applies to Armenian girls and not to foreigners (nor, as it goes in patriarchal societies, to Armenian males). Indeed, when discussing the topic I was often surprised by a sense of relativism, proclaiming that some custom was simply ‘the Armenian way of doing things’ and that it is understandable that non-Armenians don’t live according to such customs.
that only partially seem to escape the nation, are well exemplified in popular reports of the addresses rabiţ star Tata Simonyan made to crowds in both the homeland and the diaspora during a recent world tour. In August 2010, during a solo concert in Yerevan’s Hrazdan stadium, the singer addressed the crowd as follows while introducing his recent hit song In Hollywood we speak Armenian:

At this moment, it’s early morning in Los Angeles. Let us raise our voices to send our greetings to all the Armenians who live outside Armenia! In Hollywood we speak Armenian, because around the whole world, there live Armenians. [the last sentence being the song’s refrain, R.A.] 35

Here, a crowd of thousands is instructed to vocalize the connective aspirations of the dispersed and multilocal nation, with a song that is designed to educate Armenians in the diaspora to stick to their national language, albeit half-jokingly. Tata Simonyan is perhaps the only superstar of the mass mediated, globetrotting pop rabiţ pantheon who has not yet left the republic for a life in the diaspora (although some artists, like Artash Asatryan, have resettled in Armenia after living in California for several years). Thus, when he performed for 13,000 diasporan Armenians in the Staples Center arena in Los Angeles two weeks after the aforementioned Yerevan gig, he was in the moral position to tell the crowd that although he regularly witnesses them tourists in Yerevan, this is “simply not enough” and he expects more of the diaspora in their devotion to the nation. 36

Popular rabiţ singer Armenchik, born in Yerevan in 1980, moved with his family to the United States in 1989, and besides returning for one year to record an album named ‘Memories from Armenia’, has lived abroad ever since. During my stay in Yerevan, much show business reporting was devoted to the singer’s wedding, which took place in Los Angeles. In a special report in Yes, a pop culture magazine with a large readership consisting mainly of teenage and young adult girls, the imaginary elsewhere depicted in the music video for the song Miami seems to make a chastised reappearance as the singer’s wedding is portrayed. The limousine and champagne are there, as is a blonde fan girl from Russia, the bride whom the singer met in Moscow during his tour in Russia. But, in the interview, the singer is quick to point out that his bride is an Armenian from Russia, and the pictures of glamour and conspicuous consumption are juxtaposed with images of the wedding ceremony taking place inside an Armenian church in Los Angeles. To marry an oţar (non-Armenian, ‘alien’) seems out of bounds even for a superstar in a musical genre that so ostentatiously philanders with the occidentalist imagination (and less conspicuously so with the orientalist one). Indeed, 37

35 http://www.bravo.am/news/%D5%A9%D5%A1%D5%A9%D5%A1-%D5%B4%D5%A5%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%A5%D6%80%D5%A3/, last accessed 30-05-2011.
37 In comparison to the ethnopop genres of the Balkans, rabiţ is only mildly orientalist, as self-conscious oriental stylings such as belly dancers are a rare sight at concerts or in music videos.
intermarriage is considered one of the gravest instances of the ‘white massacre’ (spitak chard), as the assimilation of Armenians to the ‘host’ cultures of those who live abroad is often referred to in Armenian discourse, and rabiz singers are no exception to the taboo. Thus, ‘foreign’ popular pleasures in the ethnopop realm seem to invoke debates on what constitutes Armenianness in all cases, and regularly beg being Armenianized to obtain moral credulity.

Rabiz, then, is the imaginary elsewhere of Armenian ethnopop in a profound and polysemous sense – its sound waves evoke a fear of cultural contagion among purist cultural elites overhearing sonorous echoes of categorical Others in a melismatic note, its sentimental lyrics provide affective templates for those whose kinship networks have been disrupted by post-Soviet labor migration, and its music videos stage a peculiarly nationalized ‘Imaginary West’ conducive to the consumerist daydreams of those who feel that life in the republic is lacking in affluence. In a moral sense, the widely varying uses of rabiz as a discursive container in which to deposit almost any form of discontent serves as a backdrop for narratives of social decay. In the latter case too, one can speak of an imaginary elsewhere, in the sense that the melodrama and sentimentalism, the conspicuous consumption by ethnopop stars, oligarchs and the nouveau riche, are popularly denounced as ‘out of place’, present in today’s Armenia but not really belonging there in any essential sense, its inadmissible manifestations oftentimes attributed to imported corruptions. The latter is of course vehemently denied by its adherents and performers, many of whom also perform a good deal of patriotic songs in addition to the themes of interpersonal relations and consumerism we scrutinized in this chapter. Thus, the conception of what constitutes the Armenian nation among different social groups is shown to be multiple and oftentimes even mutually contradicting, adhering to different aesthetics and framing the ‘national style’ within widely differing boundaries.

The use of rabiz as a reprehensible predicate attributed to the lives and tastes of suspected orientophiles, oligarchs and cosmopolitans betrays an acknowledgement of ‘the Other within’, a sizeable part of the nation’s population disavowing and disobeying the idealized conception of ‘the people’ envisioned by the cultural elites. Hence, national cosmology, as a classificatory construct that seeks to ground culture in the realm of nature through the fiction of a homogenous, uniform we-group vis-à-vis its categorical Others, is exposed as artifice. Nevertheless, the nation in all its pluriformity remains largely ‘incontestable’ to most Armenians, the fragments and pieces of its polyvocality rendered inaudible under the overbearing volume of a vociferous, shared narrative framing (rather than claiming) the nation as a given, transcending the transient internal divisions of everyday life.

4.4. THEORETICAL INTERLUDE: THE NATION AS A MORAL CATEGORY

“You are already a level above rabiz, that Azerbaijani mugham of [Armenian] singers like Hayko; it’s primitive music. Are you sure you don’t want to listen to rock instead?” When I asked Vadim, a record
shop owner in his thirties, about the cassettes of Turkish pop stars Ibrahim Tatlıses and Tarkan that were present in the shelves of his boutique, he instantly excused himself for the bad taste of his customers, while stressing that these cassettes had been present for a very long time, thus proving their lack of popularity among Yerevan’s music aficionados. He explained a three-stage model in Armenian music appreciation to me, in which the ‘Turkified’ melismatic rəbiz style occupies the lowest level of it all, estradayin (‘small stage’, pop) singers are in the middle, and classic interpretations of the 18th century Caucasian troubadour Sayat-Nova were considered the optimum in good taste. His teleology of taste, however, was not a simple path of ‘purification’ – he stressed that music should have nothing to do with politics, and even acknowledged that his favorite, Sayat-Nova, had composed songs and poems in the Georgian and Azerbaijani languages as well as in Armenian. He simply didn’t like today’s Turkish and Azerbaijani pop music, nor Armenian rəbiz, because he could not stand its sentimental wailings.

We started our investigation into the role of popular culture in the formation and authentication of the Armenian nation by viewing the nation as a process and product of mass mediation. In the reception of ethnopop music, as we’ve seen in this chapter, the nation is revealed as both divided and unified. What constitutes ‘truly Armenian’ music is to some extent shared – the ethnophonic duduk, no one will deny, is the cornerstone of the nation’s musical culture, as are the ‘undiluted’ high culture renditions of the works of Komitas and Sayat-Nova. Regarding ethnopop music, however, perceptions of Armenianness vary widely – they seem to vary not only from person to person, but even within the same person, who may criticize rəbiz culture as tasteless in everyday contexts, while giving in to its unabashed emotionalism and in more celebratory settings.

“Live a life that is worthy of the sacrifices of our heroic ancestors!” This statement, written on a billboard visible from the window of a minibus near the town of Alaverdi, close to the Georgian border, seems to have a wide identificatory potential precisely by not specifying what kind of a life is connotatively implied. Its subtext can be read as follows: Armenians have heroic ancestors, these heroic ancestors sacrificed their lives, so that today’s Armenians may live worthy lives. To live a morally righteous life as an Armenian, then, may inversely become a way of paying tribute to the sacrifices of heroic ancestors – and those heroic ancestors are usually those who fought the Turks and Azerbaijanis, whose lives are dramatized in many patriotic ethnopop songs and music videos.

The statement that one is not Armenian (‘hay ches’), on the other hand, is used in everyday situations as “a rebuke that the person has violated some customary way of behaving or some traditional norm” (Suny 2001: 865; see also Platz 1996: 188-191). The record shop owner Vadim, too, called an Armenian singer’s music Azerbaijani because he felt that it did not adhere to the ‘customary’ aesthetic boundaries he envisioned for Armenian music. In the arena of Armenian politics, even when the issues under debate are not primarily ‘nationalist’ (e.g. concerned with territorial claims and ethnic nation building), the discourse regarding any topic, especially controversial ones, is suffused with elements of national cosmology;
Despite the nonnationalist issues, almost the entire [1996 presidential election] campaign, especially on the opposition side, was couched in the terminology and imagery of nationalism. The whole debate was put in terms such as traitors, anti-nation and anti-Armenian, betayers of national interests, and so forth. Opposition leaders often said that the government was selling "national treasures" and the country's wealth to foreigners under the guise of privatization or that government leaders were "agents" of external powers under the guise of politicians and (diasporan) advisers. (Panossian 2006: 236)

The point of interest here is that, like the critics who claim rabiz should be listened in mosques and its adherents who assert it's simply the Armenian way of having fun (gef), opposing camps both identify with the nation as a moral category, and can use it strategically to disqualify those elements in today’s Armenian society they deem questionable. In the publicist’s comment, broadcast on Armenian public radio, that rabiz listeners have Turkish blood flowing through their veins, as in the record shop owner’s visceral dislike of the ethnopop genre, the nation’s “collective past [is evoked] as a charter and blueprint” (Malkki 1995: 53) for the negotiation of identities in the present. This past, epitomized by the 1915 genocide especially in the diaspora, is transmitted through a variety of channels, from ethnopop songs and popular culture to oral histories and school books, perpetuating the notion that to be Armenian is to be a “member of a community of sufferers” (Panossian 2002: 136). The distant kins of violence and the sacred, rarely far removed from one another in any context of human culture, render the nation largely ‘incontestable’ (van de Port 2004) – the ‘truth effects’ of histories of genocidal violence and ethnonational conflict sanctifying the nation as a moral category, while ‘anesthetizing’ those aesthetics discursively linked to Turkey and Azerbaijan in Armenian national cosmology. The fact that many Armenians can trace their genealogies to territories that have been ethnically cleansed of its Armenian population turns such national cosmologies and mythico-histories into more than mere classificatory schemes or moralist narratives, but the multiplicity of narrative threads that can be mobilized and the ambiguous nature of much symbolism undermine the possibility of transforming these identificatory repertoires into a homogenous community – ‘the’ Armenian nation.

And yet, ‘the’ Armenian nation is considered a self-evident and self-explanatory reality by most Armenians. While a variety of social agents may adhere to widely differing, and even mutually opposing ethics and aesthetics, all of these are framed under the same denominator, the nation. In an article on the “militarization of mass consciousness” through the use of natural symbols in Japan, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney points to the semiotic mechanism of méconnaissance as “misrecognition or absence of communication, whereby parties in a given context fail to realize that they are talking past each other, deriving different signification from the same symbols and rituals” (2004: 19). I would like to propose that in Armenia, too, méconnaissance plays an important role in naturalizing the nation as an unquestionable given. There is ethnopop music portraying the nation for just about any social stratum
from electronic renditions of the works of genocide victim Komitas and troubadour Sayat-Nova with spectacular folkloristic music videos to the rock song *Ur eir Astvatz?* (‘Where were you God?’) by Arthur Meschyan, about the 1915 genocide:

Where were you God, when an entire nation was abandoned and driven insane? ...

Where were you God, when our souls cried out ‘Amen’?

While it is easy to accept the idea that there is an affective dimension involved in the reception of the musical renditions of historical narratives, as in the songs about the genocide, I would like to claim that the ‘anesthetization’ of foreign elements in the *rabiz* debate shows that there may also be a narrative dimension involved in those emotions we usually consider the property of a private, ‘interior’ realm of personal aesthetics. The visceral sensitivities of some critics on the one hand, and the excitement with tabooed elements (perhaps as ‘guilty pleasures’) by *rabiz* devotees on the other, can only be explained when we take seriously the option of aesthetics being at least partially shaped through engagements with social reality and the past.38

The diversity of forms the ethnonational stylization of popular music in Armenia takes is unified through the moral qualities attributed to the quality of nationness. The terror of history, from the genocide to the social catastrophes accompanying the nation’s problematic transition to independence, sanctifies the nation as a community of sufferers and survivors, its miasmic reverberations haunting the judgment of taste in the negotiation of a contemporary national aesthetics. The mechanism of *méconnaissance* assures that such a national aesthetics can survive as a largely fictitious construct, that it can be multiple without being perceived as such and thus need not be homogenizing, as long as the audiovisual representations of the nation are articulated with some elements of the ‘restricted code’ prescribed by the nation’s mythico-symbolic repertoire. *That* the nation is in some sense a moral demarcator, and needs to be staged and styled audiovisually, however, seems a general consensus among most Armenians—perhaps unveiling the insight that indeed, without mass mediation, the nation would not remain a self-evident reality.

38 Here I am also reminded of a commemoration ceremony for the Armenian genocide in Amsterdam, in which one of the Armenian attendees instantly walked away from the crowd when a Turkish historian and genocide recognition activist begun to speak. I later learned that he “could not bear the sound of Turkish being spoken,” although he was clearly not of an age to have witnessed the genocide in person.
5. CONCLUSION

“One heaven. One sun. One ground. One God. One cradle. One song. Amen.” – thus goes the refrain of the ambiguous rock song *Yes Im Anush Hayastani* (‘I Love Armenia’) by the Britain-based Armenian rock band Vo.X. In the music video, premièred on Armenian TV in June 2010, the idealized collective self-representations of patriotic music videos are deconstructed by juxtaposing a famous poem glorifying the Armenian nation’s splendour with the grim reality of post-Soviet hardships. The fragments of the poem by the early 20th century poet Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937), known to almost anyone who speaks Armenian, which are used as the lyrics to the aforementioned song, have been rendered into English as follows:

I love the sun-drenched zestful taste of our peerless Armenian words.
I love the languishing sad tunes of our lamentful ancient lutes.
Our fragrant flowers, blood-red roses and our ripe and luscious fruits.
I love the undulating dances of our fair Nayirian girls. …

Traverse the world no holy peak you’ll find so bright, for ever white.
Like an unreached road of glory, I love my mount Ararat.39

In the music video, the key symbols of national identity from the poem are juxtaposed with pictures of toxic waste, street prostitutes, concrete rubble and hungry children. The ‘lusciou39s fruits’ from the poem are contrasted with today’s genetically modified ones, playing the nation’s ‘ancient lutes’ has today become the sole means of income for those who became homeless as the result of post-Soviet poverty, the ‘fair Nayirian girls’ are shown to have become today’s victims of human trafficking. In this sense, the video serves as a parody of the mainstream genre of patriotic music videos, in which the Arcadian correspondence between idyllic words and imagery is still neatly preserved and the problems facing today’s Armenia are kept outside the camera’s reach.

“One cradle. One song. Amen.” At first, the band’s critique seemed clear and unambiguous to me. Nationalist discourse, exemplified by Charents’s poem, functions as a grown up’s lullaby of sorts, an ‘opium for the people’ numbing its beholders into sleepy apathy. Indeed, as we have seen, the audiovisual renditions of mythico-history that are habitually broadcast on Armenian TV tend to include a variety of conceptualizations of national time and space, but very little of the post-Soviet present that is not cast under the mythico-historic repertoire of mount Ararat and the luscious fruits growing in its plains. Then, however, I discovered that Vo.X actually consider themselves an Armenian *gospel* rock

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band, and that their “Amen” was not meant with the bitter irony I had read in it. It dawned upon me the song is not meant as a critique of unabashed nationalism at all, but rather an appeal to Armenians to confront the moral corruption and immiseration the musicians find in their homeland today.

Upon closer inspection the music video leaves a rather poignant impression on the viewer endowed with an egalitarian political ethos, as one of the problems of contemporary Armenian society that Vo.X wish to attract attention to is what they call “perversion” – the ‘un-Armenian’ Sodom and Gomorrah that is homosexuality. The band’s critique largely operates within the same discursive framework of social conservatism as that of the writings of the purist rabiz critic. Although there are many gay and bisexual cultural icons throughout the historical canon of Armenian culture—including, most ironically, the poet Yeghishe Charents whose poem Vo.X have put to music—the mainstream view is still that it is an imported perversion, foreign to the ‘natural’ Armenian orientation of heterosexuality, and so the video features pictures of gay couples that are scored out with red ink to mark their undesirability.

In defense of their homophobic position, Vo.X have claimed that “[a]ll the views and ideas expressed through this video are purely and subjectively Orthodox Christian and as such, within Armenia’s context, do not violate human rights.” Such a balanced feat of cultural relativism and essentialist nationalism, using the former to justify the latter, captures the tension the nation finds itself in well. In the statement, one may hear echoes of the idea, commonsensical to many nationalists, that the world is naturally constituted by different ‘kinds’ of humans, but there is also an acknowledgement of the subjective nature of national belonging. The point of interest is ultimately not so much the explicit opinions or intentions of the producers of ethnopop media texts, but rather in the space for debate and the negotiation of identificatory repertoires that is opened up by their being distributed on a nationwide scale. As we have seen, ethnopop, as an emic ‘ethnographic’ endeavour, chronicles the nation’s collective past in ways that provide a wide spectrum of significatory possibilities and subject positions for handling the social and political conundrums of the day – from the troublesome border politics in relation to Turkey and Azerbaijan, to the themes of dispersion and reunion characteristic of the relations between the homeland and the diaspora. In spite of the diversity and polyvocal nature of the answers generated in response to such issues, what all these audiovisual approaches to the nation have in common is their capacity to turn the nation into an experience of being moved, mobilizing the beholder’s aesthetic and affective sensibilities to subtly address the exigencies of everyday life in national terms, under a moniker of mere entertainment.

As the mixture of orientalist and occidentalist articulations and denunciations in the rabiz debate, as well as the music video by Vo.X, attests to, the notion of the nation as a moral category has important implications for the viability of strategies seeking to propose alternative trajectories. Last year, an initiative from the Ministry of Economics proposing to set the clocks in Armenia back one

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j8vf1FEtGM, last visited 18-06-2010
hour, from the 4th to the 3rd time zone, was argued in favour of not by showcasing its utilitarian benefits, but because “it is the time zone of our ancestors” (mer papakan zhamagotin դ), i.e. it would match the clocks of the Armenian republic to the hypothetical clocks in Eastern Anatolia. As the music video by Vo.X illustrates, discussions on whether homosexuality is acceptable for Armenians are framed not only using the standard discourse of human rights; on blogs one will also find heated debates on the asserted sexual identity of pre-Christian kings and medieval Armenian patriarchs, referenced as authoritative examples defining the field of the permissible in the nation’s here and now. Some of my female friends, who in their everyday aesthetic choices barely incorporated songs or music videos from the audiovisual domain of ethnopop, erupted in laughter, enthusiasm and amazement when they discovered what is in all likeliness the first feminist Armenian ethnopop music video, Karmir khndzor (‘The red apple’) by Zara. In the song, a controversial wedding custom, in which the parents of the groom send a red apple to the bride’s family after a newly wed couple has spent their first night together, having inspected the blooded sheets (sometimes mockingly called the ‘Japanese flag’) to ascertain the bride’s virginity, is ridiculed. The music video portrays the newly wed couple, tied together with a rope, their mouths stuffed with red apples, while the singer sings that she has deceived her “naïve husband” into thinking she was still a virgin – upon her deception becoming clear, Zara sings, “our grandma’s heart stopped”; “our grandpa lost all his hair.” At the end of the video, the singer declares the patriarchal tradition dead, as she moves into the fields to bury the red apple and takes a last bite out of it, with splatters of blood falling on the screen.

In spite of its qualities, rich in ideas both musical and political, mobilizing national cosmology to bring about a change in attitude, the song has not become a major hit. Nevertheless, I feel that it is important to include it as a scarce, but nevertheless existent exemplar of “repressed possibilities documentable on the margins” (Marcus 1990: 7) of today’s Armenia. Unlike early anthropological studies of the nation, such as those undertaken by Ruth Benedict and the Cultural and Personality school nearly a century ago, I am obviously not endorsing an essentialized view of a ‘national character’. Acknowledging the existence of such a hypothetical entity would be an unwarranted adoption of the dominant emic perspectives; the academic losing track of both the dynamism, fluctuations and fragmentations and the power relations characteristic of social reality. I am not making the claim that ‘the’ Armenians are a conservative and traumatized people, or that their nation is characterized by a sad and fatalistic temperament. Almost a hundred years after its onset, it would be a rather enigmatic metaphysical claim to state that the genocide has traumatized generations of Armenians living today, if we mean trauma in the conventional sense of the word, as a psychological condition induced by the unmediated force of the unspeakable ‘on the skin’.

It is, rather, the transmission and reproduction the reality of the untellable tortures endured by those who can no longer speak, the genocide’s silenced and vanquished victims, and its systematic

denial in Turkey and Azerbaijan, that produces the need for “mediation of terror through narration” (Taussig 1987: 3) and the transformation of mythico-historical narratives into audiovisual carriers of national cosmology. The terror of history, variably invoked in the intertextuality of media texts and the public texts of various everyday settings of ‘banal irredentism’, is not so much formative in what it signifies but rather, primarily, in what it does. It does not so much shape the content of everyday imaginings of subject, although some Armenians will rarely live a day in which they are not reminded of the genocide. People, in general, will usually have many more acute concerns on their mind. However, in a multilocal nation in which it is hard to find a family whose members have not been dispersed across the globe, the issue of how this condition has come about inevitably arises. The sad and melancholic tunes of the ethnophonic duduk, the instrument’s symbolism cast in cosmological terms; the controversies over the desirability of Turkish musical influences, framing ‘the Other within’; and the audiovisual dramas of virtual repatriation to lost lands, negotiating imaginary boundaries while contesting the current geopolitical reality, all provide a rich mythico-symbolic musical repertoire, enabling an engagement with the present in terms of a sonorous past.
Abrahamian, Levon  

Abu-Lughod, Lila  

Anderson, Benedict  

Appadurai, Arjun  

Attali, Jacques  

Barth, Fredrik  

Billig, Michael  

Bohman, Philip V.  

Bourdieu, Pierre  

Buchanan, Donna A.  


Bull, Michael  

Connor, Steven  

Couliano, Ioan  

Darievala, Tsypylma  

Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari  

Derogy, Jacques  
Dowsett, Charles  
1997  

Douglas, Mary  
1982  

Eliade, Mircea  
1974  

Feld, Steven  
1995  

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1978  

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1984  
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2002  

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1991  

Khorenats’i, Moses  
1978  

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2008  

Kurkchiyan, Marina  
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1990  

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2004  

Meyer, Birgit  
2009  

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Stokes, Martin


Suny, Ronald G.

Tambiah, Stanley J.

Taussig, Michael

Till, Karen E.

White, Hayden V.

Waal, Thomas de

Willis, Paul

Wolf, Eric

Yates, Frances A.

Yurchak, Alexei