

“West Beirut” filminde mezhepçi ve mezhep karşıtı temsillerin göstergebilimsel analizi

Melissa Loukieh¹ 

Özet

1975-1990 yılları arasında yaşanan iç savaş, Lübnan tarihinin en kanlı olaylarından biri olarak anımsanmaktadır. Dış aktörlerin de dahil olduğu ve ülkenin din ve mezhep gruplarını karşı karşıya getiren bu savaş, mezhepçiliği körüklemiştir ve ülkenin başkentini Müslüman Batı Beyrut ve Hristiyan Doğu Beyrut olarak ikiye bölmüştür. Taif Anlaşması ile sona eren olayları unutturmamaya yönelik tüm girişimlere karşın, Lübnan siyasi aktörleri bu savaş ile yüzleşmeyi reddetmişlerdir. Böylece olayların üstünü örtmeye çalışarak toplumsal bir amnezinin oluşması için çeşitli yollara başvurmuşlardır.

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Lübnan iç savaşını konu edinen 1998 yapımı “West Beirut” filminin içerdiği mezhepçi ve mezhep karşıtı imgeleri tespit etmektir. Batı Beyrut’ta Tarık isiminde Müslüman bir gencin savaş sürerken günlük yaşamını anlatan ve Ziad Doueiri’nin yönettiği bu filmi incelemek üzere Roland Barthes’in göstergebilim yaklaşımından yararlanılmıştır. İmgelerin düz ve yan anlamlarını öne çıkaran bulgular, filmde mezhepçi imgelerin baskın olduğunu ve mezhepçiliğe vurgu yapmak için en çok Beyrut’un ikiye ayrılması ile insanların sosyal ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisine odaklanıldığını göstermiştir. Böylece, bu filmin savaşın yıkıcı sonuçlarına dair bir hatırlatma işlevi gördüğü sonucuna varılabilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İç Savaş, İmge, Kolektif Amnezi, Lübnan, Mezhepçilik.

A semiotic analysis of sectarian and anti-sectarian representations in “West Beirut”

Abstract

The civil war that took place in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 is regarded as one of the bloodiest events in Lebanese history. This war, which involved external actors and brought the country’s different religious and sectarian groups into confrontation, intensified sectarian divisions and split the capital into Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut. Despite various efforts to keep the

¹ Doktora Öğrencisi, İletişim Fakültesi, Gazetecilik Bölümü, Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi, TÜRKİYE.
melissa.loukieh@ogr.hbv.edu.tr

memory of these events alive, Lebanese political actors have refused to confront this war. By attempting to conceal them, they have instead resorted to various means to foster a form of collective amnesia.

This study aims to identify the sectarian and anti-sectarian representations in the 1998 movie "*West Beirut*", which focuses on the Lebanese Civil War. Directed by Ziad Doueiri, the film portrays the daily life of a Muslim teenager named Tarek in West Beirut during the war. In analyzing this film, the study draws on the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes. The findings, which highlight the denotative and connotative meanings of the identified images, show that sectarian representations are dominant in the film and that the division of Beirut, along with its impact on social relations/interactions, is the primary means through which sectarianism is emphasized. As such, one could deduce that this movie serves as a reminder of the devastating implications of the war.

Keywords: Civil War, Collective Amnesia, Image, Lebanon, Sectarianism.

INTRODUCTION

The Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975 and officially ended in 1990 with the signing of the Taif Agreement. Having erupted in the predominantly Christian area of Ayn al-Rummaneh, the war triggered violent clashes among the country's various sectarian and religious groups and was marked by widespread bloodshed. When actors such as the Palestine Liberation Organization and Syria became involved, the conflict took on a regional dimension. However, when it ended, the Lebanese state undertook various measures aimed at obscuring the memory of these events. This state-driven amnesia weakened national memory in Lebanon. Communities, in turn, entered into competition to construct their own collective memories and to make them visible at the national level. This dynamic led to the marginalization of national memory and the prominence of community-based memories. Consequently, divisions among different communities have persisted, and trust in the state has been undermined. A factor that has further deepened the problem is the sectarian and exclusionary nature of the collective memories constructed by political parties. The absence of a unified national history curriculum has, for its part, also resulted in generations growing up with limited knowledge of the war and its legacy (Abi Fares, 2022, pp. 26–27). This form of collective amnesia is evident at both the official and everyday levels. In the immediate aftermath of the war, an implicit consensus emerged, not only among authorities, but also among ordinary Lebanese citizens to forget the war and to "turn the page on the past" in Lebanon's historical consciousness. This policy was articulated through various discursive tools, including promotional materials, slogans, urban planning practices, and political campaign speeches (Sawalha, 2014, p. 106). Similarly, the principle agreed upon by Lebanese political actors - "no victor, no vanquished" - enabled the inclusion of all groups involved in the civil war in the post-war political order. In exchange for disarmament, militia leaders and fighters were granted amnesty for crimes committed during the war. Representation in the Lebanese parliament was restructured to ensure parity between Christians and Muslims. This quota-based system continues to constitute one of the fundamental contradictions of Lebanese politics (Volk, 2017, p. 294).

The aim of this study is to identify the sectarian and anti-sectarian images in the 1998 film "*West Beirut*", which focuses on the Lebanese Civil War, and to analyze them within political and social contexts. To this end, the study draws on Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, examining both the denotative and connotative meanings of the identified images. As such, the study seeks to answer how

sectarianism is represented in the film and how these representations relate to debates about collective memory in Lebanon. Ultimately, it aims to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between cinema and social memory.

1. THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR (1975-1990): COURSE AND DEVELOPMENT OF EVENTS

The Lebanese Civil War, which started on April 13, 1975, spanned 15 years. The conflict was sparked when four members of the Phalangist Party were killed by unidentified individuals during the inauguration of a church near Beirut. Following this, the Phalangists ambushed a bus carrying Palestinians to the Tel al-Zaatar Refugee Camp through Ayn al-Rummaneh, a Christian neighborhood in East Beirut, resulting in the deaths of 27 people. The clashes that began between Christians and Palestinians then escalated, reflecting the polarization of the Cold War, into a broader conflict between right-wing Christian forces (the Lebanese Front) and leftist nationalist Muslim forces (the Lebanese National Movement) - in other words, between defenders of the status quo and those advocating for fundamental political reforms (Kor, 2009, pp. 50–51). Characterized by shifting alliances among Lebanese groups and the involvement of external actors, the civil war can be divided into five main phases, each marked by numerous massacres and assassinations. The period between April 1975 and November 1976 witnessed a series of failed peace initiatives. Between November 1976 and June 1982, internal conflicts were intensified by the interventions of both Israel and Syria. The period extending from June 1982 to February 1984, for its part, was dominated by Israel's invasion and its consequences. By the late 1980s, renewed internal clashes among Christian groups took place across the country, culminating in the war's end in 1990 (Sune, 2011). By November 1975, Beirut had been effectively divided into East Beirut, with a Christian majority, and West Beirut, with a Muslim majority. In East Beirut's Christian neighborhoods, armed Phalangists conducted vehicle checkpoints and identity checks, while in West Beirut, Palestinians carried out similar measures in predominantly Muslim areas (O'Ballance, 1998, p. 2). This division led to significant demographic changes in Beirut. Between 1975 and 1989, the Muslim population in East Beirut declined from 40% to 5%, whereas the Christian population residing in West Beirut decreased from 30-40% to 5% (Genberg, 2002; Huybrechts, 1991; Nasr, 1993, as cited in Yasin, 2012, p. 69).

In this context, it is important to note that there was a deep disagreement between the Lebanese Front and the Lebanese National Movement regarding the restructuring and shaping of the country's political system. The Lebanese National Movement, which advocated the elimination of sectarianism and maintained close ties with the Palestinians, emerged as the dominant force between 1975 and 1976. However, the balance of power began to shift following Syria's intervention in the war in 1976 and the assassination of the movement's founder, Kamal Jumblatt, in 1977. Between 1977 and 1982, as attempts by then-President Elias Sarkis to find a solution capable of ending the war failed, the Lebanese Front, which favored federalism, sought to assert its political ambitions and demands. Israel's invasion in 1982 further strengthened the position of this front. Nevertheless, the peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel in 1984 failed, and the Lebanese state's alignment with the Syrian regime in 1985 allowed Syria to establish dominance over

Lebanon. Meanwhile, the internal conflicts that occurred during this period (1983, 1984, and 1985) fueled sectarianism and deepened sectarian divisions (Krayem, 2014, pp. 3-4). In September 1988, outgoing President Amine Gemayel appointed Army Commander Michel Aoun as interim Prime Minister alongside the existing government to prevent a political vacuum. However, since the entire country was not under the control of this government and a large portion remained under Syrian and Israeli occupation, Aoun launched a “War of Liberation” against Syria’s presence in Lebanon on March 14, 1989. Despite the Arab League’s unsuccessful mediation efforts, the Lebanese and Syrian armies clashed intermittently for six months, devastating much of Beirut and forcing over one million residents to flee the city (Gambill, 2001). Following Aoun’s failed campaign, Lebanese parliamentarians and Arab representatives from Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco participated in a conference in Taif from September 10 to October 22, 1989, aimed at ending the civil war. The key points of the resulting agreement were as follows (Köse, 2006, pp. 58–59).

- In the Christian-dominated political system, the political power of Christians was reduced, granting the Muslim majority in Lebanon greater representation.
- In the traditional system, where the president is Maronite, the prime minister Sunni, and the speaker of parliament Shia, significant presidential powers were transferred to the cabinet.
- The ratio of Christians to Muslims in parliament, previously 5:4, was changed so that Christians and Muslims would have an equal number of seats.
- Syrian troops, who had been present in Lebanon since 1976, were to be withdrawn.

However, Aoun did not recognize this agreement. Fearing that the Lebanese Forces Party, which had supported him during the war against Syria, might depose him and accept the Taif Agreement, Aoun launched a war against this party, known as the “Elimination War,” which weakened his position. On October 13, 1990, Syria took advantage of Aoun’s situation and launched an operation against him, forcing him to take refuge in the French Embassy. The following day, he announced the end of the Liberation War. Aoun’s acceptance of defeat marked the end of the civil war that had lasted from 1975 to 1990 (Burns, 2012, pp. 29–31), leaving a lasting mark on the Lebanese history.

2. INITIATIVES AIMED AT THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLLECTIVE AMNESIA

Despite the fact that the families of civil war victims mobilized and that the war was articulated by artists, writers, and journalists, by the end of the 1990s, political actors in Lebanon had initiated a series of efforts aimed at fostering a form of collective amnesia, which they believed would serve both their personal interests and political agendas. In the post-war period, rather than confronting the reality of a history marked by traumatic violence, the Lebanese state and certain segments of society, particularly neoliberal elites, embraced amnesia as a means of escape, manifested through the deliberate imposition of neoliberal memory and spatial

policies that effectively erased remembrance of the war (Geldi, 2021, p. 27). As such, the post-war recovery process that began after the Taif Agreement was shaped around a form of collective amnesia influenced by the state-sponsored censorship of both private and public memory. In addition to the declaration of a general amnesty in 1991, this 'structured forgetting' manifested itself through the imposition of media censorship regulations in 1994, the absence of criminal tribunals, the failure to implement compensation schemes, as well as the lack of truth and reconciliation committees (Larkin, 2010, pp. 617-618). Similarly, in the post-war period, political parties sought to construct not a national memory but rather communal memories. These memories are often sectarian and exclusionary in nature. For instance, the Lebanese Forces opted to organize Christian religious ceremonies to commemorate their martyrs, while simultaneously attempting to present them as representative of all Lebanese. Likewise, the Free Patriotic Movement aimed to generalize and dominate its own narrative within the broader Christian community. In 2005, the then leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Michel Aoun, described 13 October 1991 (the date of the official military defeat) as a 'rediscovery of sovereignty and national identity,' claiming that his party was the sole actor that had fought for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty. By overlooking the narratives of other communities, these initiatives contribute to the persistence of both civil unrest and intra- and inter-communal tensions (Abi Fares, 2022, p. 27).

In addition, four years after the end of the war, a private company named "Solidere" was established and tasked with overseeing the reconstruction of Beirut's city center. Following the end of the war, the Lebanese state and the private sector launched a reconstruction campaign aimed at healing Beirut's wounds. The campaign's slogan, "Beirut: An Ancient City for the Future," along with the revival of nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s, when Beirut was known as the "Paris of the East" or the "Switzerland of the Arab World", and the focus of cultural productions such as films and photographs on the pre-war period, are among the indicators of this amnesia. These examples of remembering certain pre-war pasts reinforce the assumption, shared by many Lebanese, that the only way to end the war is to forget it, or to adopt this "collective amnesia" (Sawalha, 2014, pp. 106-107). The traces of this amnesia in reconstruction efforts are most visible in the city center that once divided Beirut during the war. The government at the time removed the war from public discourse and focused instead on reconstruction plans and political and economic recovery. However, these plans altered the capital's distinctive architectural heritage and its structures reflecting religious and cultural diversity, ultimately producing a depoliticized image of the city and constructing a new identity (Nasr, 2008, p. 3). The effects of this amnesia varied across different segments of society. Those who witnessed the civil war and carried feelings of guilt and pain distanced themselves from these traumatic events. For the younger generation and those who were outside Lebanon during the war, even without direct experience of these events, amnesia prevented them from fully recognizing them, while at the same time leading them to accept these events as formative in shaping contemporary Lebanon (Haugbolle, 2010, p. 72). In parallel, the journalist and historian Samir Kassir, who was assassinated in 2005, referred to this phenomenon as "state-sponsored amnesia". In 2001, Kassir, together with journalist-historian Amal Makarem, founded "Memory for the Future" with the aim of developing a strategy of remembrance, including organizing sessions on the war and establishing

memorials for the dead. In its founding year, the organization held a conference bringing together academics and legal experts to construct a narrative of the war. The proceedings of this conference, in which Makarem critically addressed the amnesia surrounding the war, were published the same year. Between 1999 and 2001, Kassir also established the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, and together with the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, launched the “Right to Know” campaign focusing on those who disappeared during the war (Abou Assi, 2010, pp. 401-403). These two initiatives marked a turning point in efforts to remember the war and stood as examples of counter-efforts aimed at reminding people of it, in contrast to the state’s attempts to encourage them to move on.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a semiotic analysis grounded in Roland Barthes’ approach and aims to identify sectarian and anti-sectarian images in the film “*West Beirut*”. The reason for selecting this film is that it depicts the early stages of the Lebanese Civil War, illustrating how three teenagers - Tarek, May, and Omar - come to terms with the religious schism manifested in the division of Beirut into West and East Beirut. The film is also highly significant, as it is considered a landmark in Lebanese cinema, marking the first time a Lebanese film attracted large local audiences and gained international attention (Tarraf, 2020, pp. 359-360). In addition, the number of Lebanese films that address the war is relatively limited, making such films particularly noteworthy when they do exist. In this regard, Ziad Doueiri’s film “*West Beirut*” emerges as one of the most important films in this category (Ebada, 2021, p. 93).

Since semiotics focuses on signs, it is necessary to first understand what a sign is before examining the definition of semiotics itself. According to Rıfat (2009), “a sign is generally defined as any form, object, or phenomenon that represents something other than itself and can therefore stand in for what it represents. In this sense, words, symbols, and signs are all considered signs” (p. 11). Semiotics, on the other hand, is a discipline that studies signs and systems of signs. In other words, semiotics applies linguistic methods to various objects and seeks to describe everything (such as games, gestures, facial expressions, religious rituals, literary works, and musical pieces) through language, while also attempting to explain non-linguistic phenomena by transforming them into a linguistic metaphor (Dervişcemaloğlu, 2005, p. 9). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the foundations of modern semiotics were laid by Charles Sanders Peirce in the United States, Ferdinand de Saussure in Switzerland, and the formalists in Eastern Europe (Erkman, as cited in Tekinalp & Uzun, 2019, p. 145).

Roland Barthes is one of the founding figures of modern semiotics, focusing largely on analyses of popular culture. Popular culture, on the other hand, serves to create various ambiguities in order to encourage greater consumption of its products (Yeşilyurt et al., 2025, p. 113). Barthes connected phenomena that carry meaning, such as fashion and furniture, to semiotics through the concept of signification, which refers to the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Unlike some other theorists, Barthes did not privilege language alone; instead, he

defined the subject of semiotics as any system of signs, regardless of its substance or boundaries. Images, gestures, facial expressions, music, and the elements observed in ceremonies and protocols may not constitute a language in the strict sense, yet their combinations form meaningful systems (Bircan, 2015, p. 19). Barthes also emphasized the relationship between signifiers and the secondary signified, or connotations. While denotation refers to what a sign represents, connotation refers to how that sign is represented. Since connotations depend on cultural context, they may be interpreted differently by different individuals (Karaman, 2017, pp. 30–31). In addition to this distinction, Barthes establishes a differentiation between a non-coded iconic message and a coded iconic message. The coded iconic message requires a high level of cultural knowledge for its interpretation. The non-coded iconic message, however, corresponds to the denotative level of the image. Even when cultural knowledge is limited, the viewer can still read the image, as the signifieds of this non-coded message are constituted by the real objects present in the scene (Barthes, 1982, pp. 33-35).

In Barthes' own words, every system of signification consists of a plane of expression and a plane of content; meaning emerges from the relationship between these two planes. When such a system becomes part of a second system, the latter acquires a more complex structure. In this case, the two systems intersect but do not fully coincide, resulting in a layered structure. This layering may occur in different ways depending on how the first system is incorporated into the second, leading to two distinct sets of meaning (Barthes, 1983, p. 89). Alongside these concepts, the notion of myth also occupies an important place in Barthes' work. It is also necessary to mention metaphor and metonymy. A metaphor, created through the mind and imagination, involves establishing a relationship of similarity between two things, whereas metonymy refers to the representation of a whole through one of its parts (Ataman Yengin, 2012, p. 16).

Describing myth as a system of signification, Barthes argues that myth is not eternal but has a historical foundation. This means that myth does not come from the natural qualities of things themselves but is shaped by history. Myth has no fixed limits because it is not defined by its object, but by the way it produces meaning within social use. Mythical speech is based on already constructed material and presupposes a signifying consciousness. He also defines myth as a second-order semiological system, in which a sign from the first system becomes a signifier in the second. In this process, myth does not simply reveal or reject meaning; instead, it naturalizes it. At its core, myth turns historically and culturally produced meanings into what appears natural and self-evident (Barthes, 1991). As such, and building on Barthes' theory, this analysis understands denotative meaning as culturally mediated rather than purely objective, and this will be reflected in the analysis of the images below.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- How are sectarian and anti-sectarian representations constructed in "*West Beirut*" movie?
- How does the movie "*West Beirut*" function as a counter-memory to collective amnesia in Lebanon?

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the images identified in the film *“West Beirut”*, categorizing them as sectarian and anti-sectarian and analyzing their denotative and connotative meanings based on Roland Barthes’ framework. According to Barthes, while denotative meaning refers to the literal meaning of an image, connotative meaning is associated with the cultural, ideological, and symbolic meanings linked to it. However, as mentioned in the section above, he also argues that denotative meaning is not completely neutral, as cultural meanings may become naturalized and appear objective. As such, this nuance was taken into account throughout the analysis.

4.1. Sectarian Images

This section presents the sectarian images identified in the film *“West Beirut”*.



Figure 1. Minarets and urban structures in West Beirut (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 2. A bakery with Arabic writing on the wall (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 3. A building with a minaret in West Beirut (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 4. A building with a minaret and urban structures in West Beirut (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 1. Denotative and connotative meanings

Figure	1	2	3	4
Denotative Meaning	Buildings with minarets and surrounding urban structures	Buildings with minarets and surrounding urban structures	Buildings with minarets and surrounding urban structures	Buildings with minarets and surrounding urban structures
Connotative Meaning	The events of the film taking place in a Muslim city and/or neighborhood	The events of the film taking place in a Muslim city and/or neighborhood	The events of the film taking place in a Muslim city and/or neighborhood	The events of the film taking place in a Muslim city and/or neighborhood

The first three figures (Figures 1, 2, and 3) above depict buildings with minarets and other urban structures. The connotative meaning of these images is that the events of the film occur in a neighborhood and/or city with a predominantly Muslim population. Considering that Beirut was divided during the war into Muslim and Christian sectors, this setting suggests that the events occur in West Beirut. The fourth figure, in turn, depicts a bakery in Tarik's neighborhood with Arabic writing on the walls. This writing reads: Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim. This detail further suggests that the events take place in West Beirut, the Muslim sector of the city. The accompanying sound of the call to prayer (adhan) provide further support for this interpretation. These elements function as visual cues for the audience regarding the setting of the events. Moreover, particularly in the context of the war, the analysis of this movie indicates that written and/or visual markers were used to distinguish between Muslims and Christians, or other religious groups.



Figure 5. A Wounded Woman Standing at the Door of a Bus (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 6. Arabic writing on the wall (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 2. Denotative and connotative meanings

Figure	5	6
Denotative Meaning	A woman with visible facial injuries	Arabic writing visible on a wall
Connotative Meaning	The bus incident signaling the start of the Lebanese Civil War	The involvement of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the regional dimension of the war

Figure 5 depicts a woman with visible facial injuries standing at the door of a bus. The connotative meaning of this image could be linked to the outbreak of the civil war, triggered by an attack on a church in Ain er-Rummaneh, coupled with the subsequent attack on a bus carrying Palestinians, alongside various domestic and external factors (Tinas, 2017, p. 100). This scene could also refer to the Muslim-Christian opposition and emphasize the religious and sectarian dimension of the war, as the woman may symbolize Muslims, while Ain er-Rummaneh is commonly associated with Christians. In Figure 6, the writing reads “Resistance Fighters (Fida’iyun).” Its connotative meaning could refer to the involvement of Palestinians, representing the Palestine Liberation Organization, in the war. The use of the term “resistance fighter” frames the participation of Palestinians as an act of resistance, and could contribute to its legitimization. Consequently, this image illustrates the regional dimension of the war and shows that not only religious and sectarian groups, but also actors from different countries participated along these factions.



Figure 7. A man driving his car (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 8: A dialogue between two people (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 9. An armed man and cars at checkpoint (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 10. A young man approaching another man sitting on a chair (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 3. Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Figure	7	8	9	10
Denotative Meaning	A car positioned at a checkpoint	A dialogue between two people	An armed person and cars in the frame at a checkpoint	A young man (Tarik) and another standing figure at a checkpoint
Connotative Meaning	The division of Beirut during the civil war and the prohibition of movement from West Beirut to East Beirut (and vice versa)	The division of Beirut during the civil war and the prohibition of movement from West Beirut to East Beirut (and vice versa)	The division of Beirut during the civil war and the prohibition of movement from West Beirut to East Beirut (and vice versa)	The division of Beirut during the civil war and the prohibition of movement from West Beirut to East Beirut (and vice versa)

Figures 7, 8, and 9 depict a checkpoint where armed men stop the car of Riyad, Tarik's father, as he tries to take Tarik to his school located in West Beirut. The scenes also show Riyad being questioned by these armed men. The connotative meaning of these scenes could be linked to the division of Beirut into West and East Beirut during the civil war along the Green Line, which passed through the city's central district and extended along Damascus Road, creating a corridor of casualties,

injuries, and urban destruction. This, in turn, highlights the geographic dimension of sectarianism and its disruptive effect on daily life (Humphreys, 2015, p. 1). This division is further suggested in Figure 8 through the dialogue between Riyadh and the armed man. The armed man says to Riyadh, *"They're not letting anyone through,"* and Riyadh asks, *"Who?"* The armed man responds, *"Christians. Only Christians can pass,"* to which Riyadh replies, *"I'm from Beirut."* The use of the phrase *"not letting"* without a clear subject emphasizes the disconnection between different groups and the depth of the division. Riyadh's question, *"Who?"* shows his unfamiliarity with this division and suggests that it is a situation specific to the civil war. Finally, the armed man states, *"Beirut is now West Beirut and East Beirut. They are not letting Muslims pass."* This dialogue both indicates that the events occur in West Beirut and points to the deep sectarian divisions caused by the civil war. In addition, Figure 8 shows a person wearing a scarf known as a kufiya (kufiyya). As a symbol associated with Palestinians, this detail connotes that the person is Palestinian, further emphasizing the involvement of Palestinians in the war and its regional dimension. In Figure 8, Tarik and his friends are seen attempting to cross from West Beirut to the other side. With hesitant steps, he approaches an armed individual at the checkpoint and asks, *"Can we pass to the other side?"* This scene carries three connotative meanings. First, the presence of the checkpoint illustrates the division of Beirut. Second, Tarik's hesitation and request for permission suggests that movement between the two sectors is limited and risky. Third, despite having previously faced a similar situation with his father, Tarik's willingness to attempt crossing into East Beirut indicates the existence of individuals who, despite the divide, try to transcend these boundaries, adhering more to a nationalist identity than a religious one.



Figure 11. A group of men playing backgammon (*West Beirut*, 1998)

Table 4. Denotative and connotative meanings

Figure	11
Denotative Meaning	A group of people playing backgammon and talking
Connotative Meaning	The possibility of unity at the individual level despite sectarianism, but the fact that this division is more politically imposed

Competing signifying structures are identified in Figure 11. The denotative meaning of the scene is a group of people gathered and playing backgammon. The first connotative meaning could be the possibility of coexistence among individuals belonging to different sectarian/religious affiliations, even in the midst of a civil war, and the idea that unity, if not at the political level, can still prevail among individuals and citizens of the same country. This is suggested by the statement of the man smoking, who says, *"I grew up with Muslims. No one can force me to leave this place."* The second connotative meaning could be the rise of sectarian/religious conflict between Muslims and Christians during the war and the fact that sectarianism predates the war itself. This is underlined by the statement, *"For hundreds of years, Christians did not want to live with Muslims."* It thus becomes clear that sectarianism is approached differently at the level of politics and individuals. While individuals may resist it, political decisions and war appear to impose unwanted sectarian divisions on people.



Figure 12. A young man hiding his friend's necklace (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 13. A man pointing a gun at a young woman (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 14. A young woman walking behind her friend (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 5. Connotative and Denotative Meanings

Figure	12	13	14
Denotative Meaning	A young man and a young woman with a necklace covered by clothing	A man holding a gun, with a young woman in the frame	A young woman and a young man walking in a street scene
Connotative Meaning	The prohibition of Christians from being present in West Beirut, highlighting sectarian discrimination and division	The prohibition of Christians from being present in West Beirut	Sectarian/religious discrimination among people

The three scenes depicted in the figures above are interconnected and reflect the tension between Tarik's friends - Omar (Muslim) and May (Christian). In Figure 10, Omar is seen, with fear evident in his eyes, trying to hide the cross that May is wearing beneath her clothes. The connotative meaning of this scene suggests that, within the film's representation of the war, the presence of Christians in West Beirut (or vice versa) could be perceived as risky. In the second image, the armed man pointing his gun solely at May suggests that only Muslims are allowed to be present in West Beirut, which is predominantly Muslim. In the final image, May is seen walking behind Omar and Tarik while removing the cross from beneath her clothes. These images carry two connotative meanings. First, May's decision to put the cross back on indicates her attachment to her identity despite the war, as well as her rejection of sectarian/religious divisions and of being judged on the basis of her identity. Second, Omar's disapproval of her due to her sectarian/religious identity leads him to distance himself from her. This situation demonstrates how the civil war negatively affected social relations. Omar's statement, "*You, daughter of the cross, if you wear the cross again, I will hang you with my own hands,*" makes this even more explicit. Moreover, the expression "*daughter of the cross*" functions as a label of sectarian/religious belonging, indicating how identity markers are used to judge and categorize individuals. This scene contrasts with the earlier image of people playing backgammon, thereby showing that while the film reflects the polarization created by the war, it also suggests that some individuals are unaffected by it.



Figure 15. A young man with an angry expression (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 16. Three young people eating sweets (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 6. Connotative and Denotative Meanings

Figure	15	16
Denotative Meaning	A young man (Omar) standing at a door	Three young people eating sweets
Connotative Meaning	Omar's anger toward Tarik for bringing a Christian girl, reflecting prejudice	Omar's refusal to accept sweets from May due to her identity, reflecting sectarian/religious divisions

Figures 15 and 16, once again, emphasize the impact of sectarianism and religious divisions on social relations. In Figure 15, Tarik and May visit Omar. However, as soon as Omar notices the cross that May is wearing, he becomes angry with Tarik and asks, “*Who did you bring with you?*” After Tarik replies, “*She is a very good girl,*” Omar responds, “*Is that so? What is that cross she is wearing?*” The connotative meaning of this exchange is, on the one hand, Omar’s surprise at the presence of a Christian in West Beirut, suggesting that such presence is perceived as forbidden; on the other hand, it could reflect his prejudice toward May due to her sectarian/religious identity. Moreover, this scene suggests the idea that the divisions were compounded by the war and that May’s presence in that area also connects to the pre-war period. Tarik’s statement, “*She is a very good girl,*” further highlights how individuals belonging to different sects are subjected to marginalization or negative judgment. At the same time, as seen in other scenes, the civil war affected individuals in different ways and to varying degrees. In Figure 16, May attempts to offer dessert to both Tarik and Omar; however, Omar refuses it. The connotative meaning of this refusal is that the war negatively affects relationships between individuals belonging to different sectarian groups, restricts openness, and fosters prejudice.



Figure 17. A young girl wearing a necklace (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 7: Connotative and Denotative Meanings

Figure	17
Denotative Meaning	A young girl wearing a necklace
Connotative Meaning	The perception of forming friendships with individuals of different sectarian/religious affiliations as a crime

Figure 17 depicts May wearing a necklace (cross). In this scene, Tarik gets into a fight with a young man named Azuri because of a barking dog. After Azuri notices the cross that May is wearing, the fight escalates, and Azuri calls Tarik a “traitor.” The connotative meaning of this scene could be that the war drives individuals with different sectarian affiliations apart and leads to the perception that forming social relationships between them is a crime.

4.2. Anti-Sectarian Images

In addition to the sectarian images present in the film, this section also highlights images that reject sectarianism



Figure 18. A young man carrying a loudspeaker (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 19. A group of students applauding (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 8. Connotative and Denotative Meanings

Figure	18	19
Denotative Meaning	A young man carrying a loudspeaker	A group of students applauding
Connotative Meaning	The unifying power of the Lebanese national anthem	Students listening to the Lebanese national anthem, sense of belonging

In Figure 18, Tarik is seen carrying a loudspeaker and singing the Lebanese national anthem. Tarik attends the French school operating in Lebanon (Lycée Français). Therefore, while the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise,” is being played at school, Tarik starts singing the Lebanese national anthem. The connotative meaning of this scene could be Tarik’s sense of belonging to Lebanon and his stance against any external intervention in a country that was once a French colony. In the second image, the students applauding Tarik are shown in a moment of joy. The connotative meaning of this could refer to the desire for unity among individuals and the unifying power of the Lebanese national anthem across different sectarian affiliations. Here, the message that sectarianism and divisions are a consequence of the war is conveyed directly.

**Figure 20.** Two people walking together (*West Beirut*, 1998).**Figure 21.** Two people riding the same bicycle (*West Beirut*, 1998).**Figure 22.** A girl taking off her necklace (*West Beirut*, 1998).**Figure 23.** A girl hugging and kissing her friend (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 9. Connotative and Denotative Meanings

Figure	20	21	22	23
Denotative meaning	Two people walking together	Two people riding the same bicycle	A girl taking off her necklace	A girl hugging and kissing her friend
Connotative Meaning	The ability of people belonging to different sectarian/religious groups to form friendships and establish social relationship	The ability of people belonging to different sectarian/religious groups to form friendships and establish social relationship	The idea that friendship and belonging to the same country are stronger than sectarianism and broader societal divisions	The idea that friendship and belonging to the same country are stronger than sectarianism and broader societal divisions

Figures 20 and 21 depict Tarik, a Muslim, and May, a Christian, walking side by side and riding the same bicycle. The connotative meaning of these images is that, despite the war's intensification of sectarianism, individuals belonging to different sectarian groups can still form friendships and social relationships. Here, friendship and social bonds are emphasized as being above sectarian divisions. In Figure 22, May is seen giving the necklace she is wearing to Omar, which constitutes the denotative meaning of the image. The connotative meaning of the scene points to the primacy of friendship and human relations that bring individuals together. The act of giving a cross to a Muslim person underscores a sense of brotherhood. May's question to Omar, "Is this what provokes you?", further suggests that friendship is more important than sectarian affiliation. In the final image, May kissing Omar could symbolize the complete removal of sectarian barriers.



Figure 24. A Muslim woman (*West Beirut*, 1998).



Figure 25. A Christian woman (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 10. Connotative and Denotative Meanings

Figure	24	25
Denotative Meaning	A woman wearing a headscarf	A woman in the frame
Connotative Meaning	The ability of people belonging to different sectarian/religious groups to form friendships and establish social relationship	The ability of people belonging to different sectarian/religious groups to form friendships and establish social relationship

In Figure 24, a woman wearing a headscarf is shown, while Figure 25 depicts another woman without a headscarf. To better understand the connotative meaning of these two images, they must be read in relation to one another. The director chooses to present these images consecutively, emphasizing the sorrow experienced by both women; the reason for this is that, although the war is sectarian in nature, its impact extends across all sectarian/religious groups. While some individuals are affected by the intensification of sectarianism, the war's suffering appears to affect both Muslims and Christians without distinction.

**Figure 26.** A wall writing that reads, “Beirut is my mother” (*West Beirut*, 1998).**Table 11.** Connotative and denotative meanings

Figure	26
Denotative Meaning	A wall writing that reads, “Beirut is my mother”
Connotative Meaning	The idea that, despite the civil war, Beirut remains a city for everyone and serves as a unifying force rather than a source of division among sectarian/religious groups

In Figure 26, Tarik, Omar, and May are seen together in a room with writing on the wall that reads, “*Beirut is my mother.*” The connotative meaning of this scene is that Beirut belongs to everyone, regardless of sectarian differences, and accommodates diverse sectarian and religious groups, as represented by the three teenagers. This scene also shows that Beirut is divided due to the war and that some segments of society reject sectarianism and broader societal divisions.



Figure 27. A dialogue between two people (*West Beirut*, 1998).

Table 12. Connotative and denotative meanings

Figure	27
Denotative Meaning	A dialogue between two people
Connotative Meaning	The dialogue between Tarik and Um Walid reflects the rejection of sectarianism and other societal divisions and shows that Beirut is a city that accommodates different sectarian groups together.

In this photograph, there is a dialogue between Tarik and a woman named Um Walid. After Tarik says that he is from West Beirut, Um Walid becomes angry and says, “*West Beirut? What are West Beirut and East Beirut? There is no such thing. There is only Beirut here.*” The meaning of this could be the rejection of sectarianism. This scene also highlights Beirut’s role as a city that accommodates many sectarian groups.

CONCLUSION

Fifty years after its end, the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, continues to emerge as one of the bloodiest events that has not only left a mark on the country’s past but also shaped its present. This war was not limited to clashes among Lebanon’s various sectarian and religious groups; it also gained a broader dimension with the involvement of regional actors such as Syria and the Palestine

Liberation Organization. The fact that the peace negotiations to end the war were held in the city of Taif further reinforces this regional dimension and shows the extent to which the conflict concerned multiple regional actors. Although Lebanese society has made various efforts to ensure that the war is not forgotten by future generations and to avoid falling into its trap again, the state has adopted policies that have contributed to the formation of a form of collective amnesia. In this context, rather than confronting and coming to terms with the past, the Lebanese state chose to adopt measures that served its interests rather than those of its people. The reconstruction of downtown Beirut by a private company called Solidere, the dissemination of a discourse of “turning the page on the past,” and the political consensus around the principle of “no victor, no vanquished” constitute key examples of this policy.

In light of this state-sponsored amnesia, Lebanese cinema was one of the few arenas where the civil war was confronted, although it cannot be considered an innocent form of cultural production. Alongside its engagement with social tensions, it often represents the Civil War through narratives of self-victimisation by an identified or unidentified “Other.” At times, it also obscures the realities of wartime Lebanese society. Subsequently, the study of Lebanese cinema is double-edged and contributes to the construction of Lebanese historical memory (Khatib, 2008). As such, taking into account the role of Lebanese cinema and based on the analysis of West Beirut, one could deduce that the film stands out as an important narrative and cultural product in relation to collective memory. Filmed during the war itself, it vividly reflects the disruptions caused by the conflict, the division of Beirut between its eastern and western sectors, restrictions on mobility between different parts of the city, the difficulties of everyday life, and the tensions between individuals belonging to different social and sectarian groups.

The findings of the semiotic analysis conducted as part of this study reveal that the film *West Beirut* contains both sectarian and anti-sectarian images, with the former being more dominant. As such, it can be concluded that this film, created by Ziad Doueiri, serves as a reminder to both current and past generations of the devastating implications of the war and the divisions it created on multiple levels. The film makes visible the sectarian and religious nature of the Lebanese Civil War, particularly its profound impact on social life and interpersonal relations between people from different backgrounds. While the spatial divisions between West Beirut and East Beirut illustrate the geographical and everyday manifestations of sectarianism, the tensions between the three teenagers, particularly Omar and May, highlight its implications at the level of friendship, solidarity, and human bonds. Moreover, the film sheds light on the impact of the war on mobility and how a city that supposedly belongs to everyone becomes a key obstacle to movement. This is clearly illustrated by checkpoints and by individuals, such as Tarik’s father, who are prohibited from crossing between the two sides of the city. At the same time, Ziad Doueiri includes scenes involving Tarik, May, and other characters to demonstrate that while the war divides society and reinforces sectarian prejudices, these prejudices are not always determining and can be transcended at the individual level. This suggests that, while serving as a memory of the civil war, the film also reminds viewers of the importance of solidarity between people and emphasizes that national belonging is more important than sectarian or religious identity. In this

respect, the film presents both sectarian and anti-sectarian images, offering a multilayered and critical perspective on both the social and individual dimensions of war. Ultimately, this analysis shows that the film not only depicts the destructive effects of war but also offers a narrative that helps make sense of solidarity in human relations, practices of coexistence, and struggles over identity.

Yazarların Katkı Oranları

Sorumlu yazar %100 oranında katkı sağlamıştır.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı

“West Beirut” filminde mezhepçi ve mezhep karşıtı temsillerin göstergebilimsel analizi” başlıklı makalenin herhangi bir kurum, kuruluş, kişi ile mali çıkar çatışması yoktur.

Etik Beyan

Bu çalışmada, kişisel veri işleme veya telif hakkı ihlali teşkil eden herhangi bir veri kullanılmamış olup, etik kurul onayı gerektirecek insan veya hayvan örneklemli deneysel prosedürler içermemektedir.

REFERENCES

- Abi Fares, S. (2022). *Amnesia in post-war Lebanon: A recipe for violence and instability*. Lebanese American University. <http://hdl.handle.net/10725/14955>
- Abou Assi, E. (2010). Collective memory and management of the past: The entrepreneurs of civil war memory in post-war Lebanon. *International Social Science Journal*, 61(202), 399–409. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2011.01772.x>
- Ataman Yengin, D. (2012). Mekanikleşen birey: Arçelik örneğinin R. Barthes’a göre çözümlemesi. *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication*, 2(1), 13–21.
- Barthes, R. (1991). *Mythologies*. The Noonday Press.
- Barthes, R. (1983). *Elements of semiology*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Barthes, R. (1982). *Image, music, text*. Hill and Wang.
- Bircan, U. (2015). Roland Barthes ve göstergebilim. *Sosyal Bilimler Araştırma Dergisi*, (26), 17–41.
- Burns, R. (2012). *Absent memory: A study of the historiography of the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990* [Unpublished bachelor’s thesis]. Wesleyan University.
- Dervişcemaloğlu, D. (2005). *Temel göstergebilim (semiyotik) kavramları üzerine bir inceleme* [Unpublished master’s thesis]. Ege University.
- Doueiri, Z. (Director). (1998). *West Beirut* [Film]. 3B Productions.

- Ebada, M, M, G. (2021). *Beirut/the other side of the city: The impact of visual texture roduction of the Lebanese postmemory generation, 1989 – present* [Unpublished master's thesis]. The American University in Cairo.
- Gambill, G. (2001). Michel Aoun, former Lebanese prime minister. *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, 3(1).
- Geldi, S. (2021). Savaş sonrası Lübnan sanatında imge ve mekân: In This House (2005). *Artuklu Sanat ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi*, (5), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.46372/arts.793521>
- Karaman, E. (2017). Roland Barthes ve Charles Sanders Peirce'in göstergebilimsel yaklaşımlarının karşılaştırılması. *İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi Dergisi*, 9(2), 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.17932/IAU.IAUD.13091352.2017.9/34.25-36>
- Khatib, L. (2008). *Lebanese cinema: Imagining the civil war and beyond*. I.B. Tauris.
- Haugbolle, S. (2010). *War and memory in Lebanon*. Cambridge University Press.
- Humphreys, D. (2015). The reconstruction of the Beirut central disctrict: An urban geography of war and peace. *Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies*, 6(4), 1-14.
- Kor, T. Z. (2009). *Ortadoğu'nun aynası Lübnan*. İHH Araştırma ve Yayınlar Birimi.
- Köse, T. (2006). *Lübnan'da istikrar arayışları*. SETA. <https://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/lubnanda-istikrar-arayislari.pdf>
- Krayem, H. (2014). *The Lebanese civil war and the Taif Agreement*. American University of Beirut. <https://www.civil-center.org/files/taif/The-Lebanese-Civil-War-and-the-Taif-Agreement---Hassan-Krayem.pdf>
- Larkin, C. (2010). Beyond the war? The Lebanese post-memory experience. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42(4), 615–635.
- Nasr, N. (2008). A fragmented unity: Lebanon's war and peace in cultural memory. *Global Media Journal*, 7(12), 1-10.
- O'Ballance, E. (1998). *Civil war in Lebanon, 1975–1992*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rıfat, M. (2009). *Göstergebilimin ABC'si*. Say Yayınları.
- Sawalha, A. (2014). After amnesia: Memory and war in two Lebanese films. *Visual Anthropology*, 27(1–2), 105–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2014.852871>
- Sune, H. (2011, October 28). *The historiography and the memory of the Lebanese civil war*. Sciences Po. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/historiography-and-memory-lebanese-civil-war.html>
- Tarraf, Z. (2020). (Re)negotiating belonging: Nostalgia and popular culture in postwar Lebanon. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 41(3), 355-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2020.1751600>
- Tekinalp, Ş., & Uzun, R. (2019). *İletişim araştırmaları ve kuramları*. Beta.
- Tinas, M. (2017). Revisiting Lebanese civil war. *Gazi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, (Gazi Akademi Genç Sosyal Bilimciler Sempozyumu 2017 Özel Sayısı), 88-108.

- Volk, L. (2017). Memory politics in Lebanon a generation after the civil war. [Review of the books *War is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*, by S. Hermez, & *Hizbullah and the Politics of Remembrance: Writing the Lebanese Nation*, by B. Saade]. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 10(2-3), 293–298.
- Yasin, N. (2012). Beirut. *Cities*, 29(1), 64–73.
- Yeşilyurt, S., Barış, Ö. & Çetin, T. (2025). Popüler kültürün bir taşıyıcı ögesi olarak reklam mitleri. *International Journal of Advanced Natural Sciences and Engineering Researches*, 9(8), 111-116.